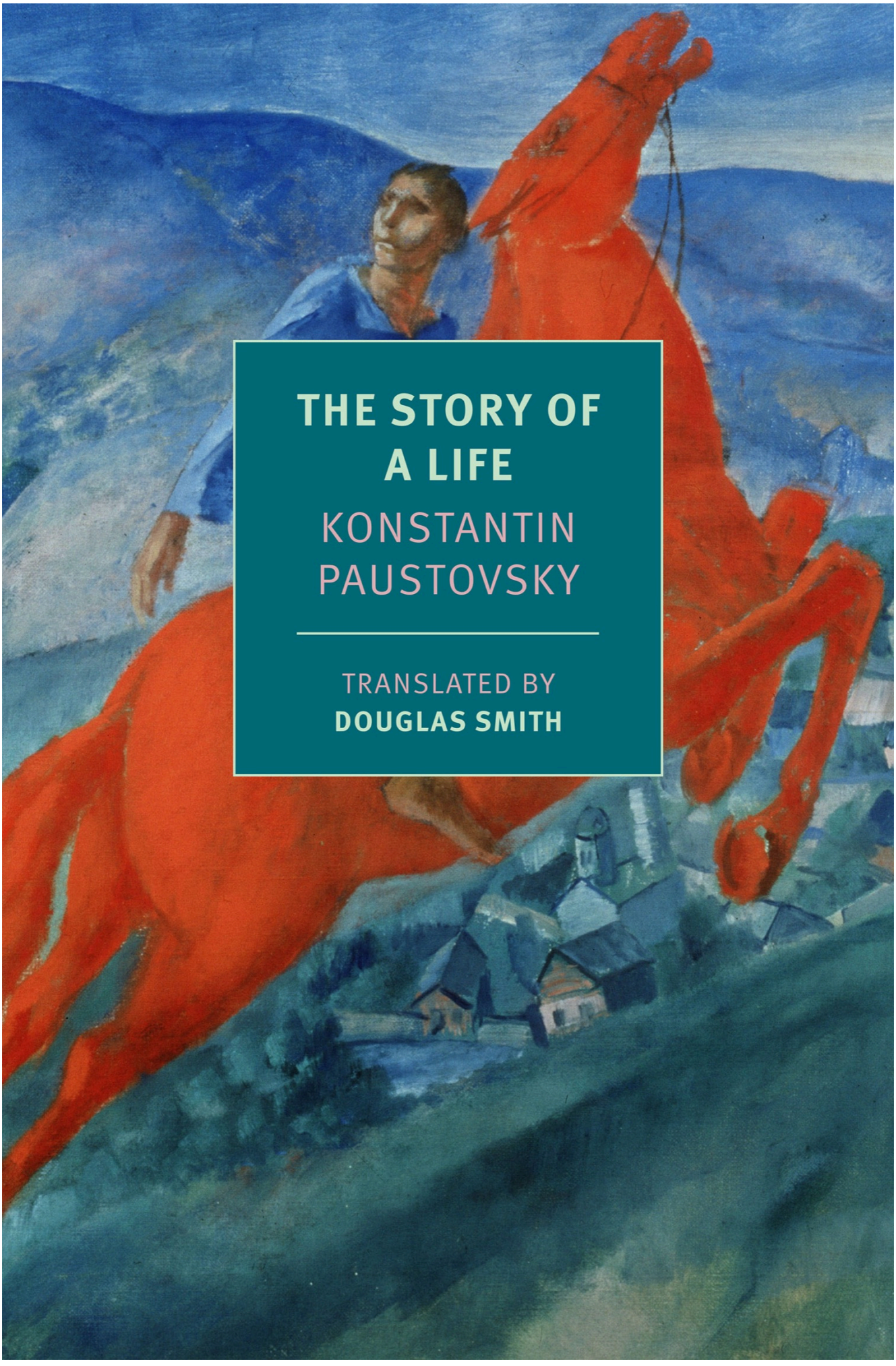

THE STORY OF A LIFE

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

TRANSLATED BY
DOUGLAS SMITH

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY (1892–1968) was born in Moscow and grew up in Ukraine, where he attended the same Kyiv high school as Mikhail Bulgakov. His law studies at the University of Moscow were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I and, in the years that followed, he would make ends meet as a trolley driver, a paramedic, a factory worker, and a fisherman. He had begun publishing stories as early as 1911 but it was not until the 1930s that his fiction, which is often about the lives of Soviet workers, nature, and events of Russian history, began to be noticed. During World War II, he served as a war correspondent and in the 1950s used his position to publish young writers as well as writers who had been suppressed during Stalin's regime. His best-known work is his autobiography, *The Story of a Life*, a searching six-volume chronicle of a life touched by the often bewildering events of the twentieth century. In 1965, Paustovsky was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

DOUGLAS SMITH is a translator and historian, and has written several books about Russian history. His book *Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy* won the inaugural Pushkin House Russian Book Prize in 2013, was a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week, and was chosen Book of the Year by Andrew Solomon in Salon.

THE STORY OF A LIFE

Books 1–3

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

Translated from the Russian by

DOUGLAS SMITH

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INTRODUCTION

Konstantin Paustovsky: Life and Work of a Forgotten Master

In June 1964, having just alighted from her plane in Moscow, Marlene Dietrich was mobbed by reporters. The actress had arrived in the Soviet Union for a concert tour, and the press was in a fever over the chance to interview the Hollywood legend. Bombarded by questions, Dietrich replied that there was only one thing she had to say: tell me all you know about Konstantin Paustovsky.

Dietrich had recently read a French translation of Paustovsky's novella *The Telegram* and could not stop thinking about it and its author. For the next hour the reporters told her everything they knew about Paustovsky before Dietrich finally had to end the conversation and leave for her hotel.

On the night of the 13th, Dietrich performed for a gathering of writers, artists and actors at Moscow's Central House of Writers. Before going out on stage, her interpreter came to the dressing room to tell Dietrich that Paustovsky was in the audience. She couldn't believe it. 'That's impossible,' she gasped, seized by an attack of nerves. She was unhappy with her performance that night, for she overexerted herself trying to make the best possible impression on the one man in Russia she had most wanted to meet.

After taking her final bow, Dietrich was instructed to wait a moment. Before she realised what was happening, there was Paustovsky slowly mounting the stairs onto the stage. Dietrich recalled later that she was so overcome with emotion she was unable to speak. All she could do to express her admiration for Paustovsky was to fall at his feet and bow her head. Paustovsky gently took her hands in his. The hall erupted in applause. A photographer captured the scene.

Paustovsky started to help Dietrich back up when his doctor ran to the stage. 'Don't even think of lifting her!' he ordered. Paustovsky, now in his early seventies, had come to the concert straight from his hospital bed where he had been recovering from his second heart attack. The gentleman in Paustovsky wrestled with the voice of his doctor telling him to leave Dietrich on her knees and not strain his weak heart. He stood there for a few awkward moments until help arrived and Dietrich was returned to her feet.

The two spent the next several hours together talking about literature and art. 'He is the best Russian writer I know,' she wrote in her memoirs. 'I regret that I did not meet him earlier.' The following year Dietrich told the BBC that if she were cast away on a desert island and could bring only one book with her it would be Paustovsky's *The Story of a Life*.[1]

At the time of her visit, Paustovsky was nearing the height of his fame. Four years later, upon his death at the age of seventy-six, he was not only Russia's most treasured writer of the twentieth century but, according to his obituary in *The Times*, perhaps the most popular and admired living Soviet writer in both Britain and the United States.[2]

It is hard to exaggerate Paustovsky's stature in the 1960s. Over his long career, he wrote dozens of short stories, novels, screenplays, dramas, fairytales and children's books. Many of these works were made into films, and his stories served as the inspiration for three operas and a ballet. In 1941, he wrote the script for the film *Lermontov*, with a score by Sergei Prokofiev. The work that brought him the greatest fame, however, was his epic six-part memoir, *The Story of a Life*, published in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1963. His memoir was devoured by generations of Russians, and Paustovsky himself became the object of intense fascination among his devoted fans. In his later years he settled in the town of Tarusa, south of Moscow, where he would write the final volumes of his memoir in a small hut perched on a high bluff. When word of Paustovsky's writing shed got out, crowds began gathering in a nearby field in the hope of observing the master at work. Paustovsky soon found it impossible to concentrate and had to plant a long row of trees to afford him the necessary privacy to write.[3]

But it wasn't just the writing that so endeared Paustovsky to his fellow Russians. It was his character as well. He was one of the few honest and uncompromised writers of the Soviet period. He managed not to join the Communist Party, to sign his name to any denunciation of another writer, or to sell out his talent to curry favour with Soviet officialdom. Paustovsky somehow found a way not only to survive the bloody horrors of twentieth-century Russia, but to live a life of basic decency and to preserve his inner freedom against the monstrous force of totalitarianism.

Konstantin Georgievich Paustovsky was born in Moscow in 1892. His father, Georgy, a descendant of Petro Konashevych-Sahaidachny, the brilliant seventeenth-century military commander and hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, served as a statistician for the Russian railway. His mother, Maria Grigorievna Vysochanskaya, came from an impoverished noble family. Her father was employed at a sugar factory. Paustovsky's grandfather on his father's side had been a *chumak*, travelling back and forth between central Ukraine and the Black Sea with his oxcart hauling goods to market. One of his grandmothers was a Turk, the other a Pole. Like so many Russians, Paustovsky was a product of empire.

In 1898, the Paustovskys – little Kostik, as he was affectionately called, his older sister Galina (Galya), and his brothers Boris and Vadim – moved to Kiev, where Georgy took a job with the South West Railway. In 1904, Paustovsky was admitted to the prestigious First Kiev Gymnasium. Among his schoolmates was Mikhail Bulgakov. The idyll that had been Paustovsky's childhood came to an end two years later when Georgy left Maria for another woman. Devastated by the betrayal, the family began a downward spiral. In 1909, Maria, no longer able to make ends meet in Kiev, took Galya and Vadim to Moscow and sent Kostik off to live with her brother, Nikolai Vysochansky, and his family in Bryansk. From then on, Paustovsky began what he would call his 'wandering life', forever on the move, never settling down in any one place for long.[4]

The following year he managed to return to the gymnasium in Kiev by supporting himself as a private tutor. After graduating in 1912, Paustovsky enrolled in the Imperial Kiev University and published his first story, 'On the Water', in the journal *Ogni* ('Lights'). He had been writing for three years by now – poems and short sketches – and was fully consumed by the dream of becoming a writer.

Two years later Paustovsky found himself back in Moscow. He had planned to continue his studies at the university there when the First World War began and his brother Vadim left for the front. Soon after, Boris joined the army as well. Paustovsky quit his studies and got a job as a tram driver to help support his mother and sister. His poor eyesight, plus the fact that he was the youngest of three sons, two of whom were fighting in the tsar's army, saved him from the bloody savagery of the war. Both Vadim and Boris were killed in action in 1915.

By then Paustovsky was serving as an orderly on a hospital train at the front. Wounded by a German shell, he returned to Moscow and found work in an arms factory and began writing his first novel, *The Romantics*, eventually published in 1935. It wasn't long before he was off again – first to Yekaterinoslav, then Yuzovka, then Taganrog, where he laboured in a series of factories, before being taken on as a fisherman in a small village on the Sea of Azov. By 1917, he had returned to Moscow and started working as a newspaper reporter, which would become his main occupation for the next decade. All the while Paustovsky continued to write. That same year he gathered up his courage and sent a few of his poems to Ivan Bunin, his literary idol. Amazingly, Bunin replied: 'I think your future lies in prose, it is here I see your true poetry. If you are able to show enough persistence, I am certain you can achieve something significant.'[5]

On a dangerous journey to reach his mother and sister, now living in the Ukrainian countryside, Paustovsky found himself trapped in Kiev by the raging violence of the Russian Civil War. Stranded there for a year, he survived off piecework for a few publications before being conscripted first into the army of Ukrainian hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi and then a convict regiment in the Red Army. At the first opportunity, Paustovsky escaped Kiev for Odessa in 1919. He would remain here, making numerous excursions around the Black Sea region and Caucasus, for the next several years, and become part of a lively group of writers which included Isaac Babel and Ilya Ilf.

In 1925, Paustovsky published his first book of stories and short works – *Sea Sketches* – followed by another collection, titled *Oncoming Ships*, two years later. The editors of this second book refused to include one of the stories, however, because they felt it amounted to nothing more than 'a romantic episode, completely devoid of social significance'.[6] The ideological criticism of his writing was to grow in the coming years.

Paustovsky's 1929 novel *Shining Clouds* was denounced by one critic as having the potential 'to disorganise the class consciousness of the proletarian reader' and was placed on a 'blacklist' of works to be removed from all Soviet libraries. The Communist Party's Central Committee debated confiscating every copy of *Shining Clouds* as being, in the words of one speaker, 'very ideologically harmful, particularly for young readers'. In the end, no action was taken, but Paustovsky now understood that he was being watched. 'Apparently, they're going to be keeping an eye on me as a writer. I find this business extremely stupid and typical of the times,' he wrote in a letter that summer.[7] All this was happening as Stalin's 'Revolution from Above' was getting under way. It was a dangerous time for a writer to be

suspected of ideological deviance, and as Paustovsky would later remark, it was pure chance that he survived Stalin's terror.[8]

Out of step with the main currents of Soviet literature, Paustovsky next wrote two novels inspired by the crash industrialisation of the First Five-Year Plan. *Kara-Bugaz* (1932) took as its subject the construction of an industrial salt extraction plant along the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, while in *Kolkhida* (1934) Paustovsky recounted the development of a gargantuan chemical facility at Berezniki in the Ural Mountains, one of the largest industrial projects of the time. Although both works received an enthusiastic response, including from Maxim Gorky,[9] Paustovsky chafed at the prospect of continuing to write works in the Socialist Realist mode (attentive readers noted that at its core *Kara-Bugaz* was in fact an adventure novel) and he was growing disgusted with life in Moscow.

Under Stalin the literary world was becoming increasingly bureaucratised, constrained and smothered by censorship and Party control. What Paustovsky dubbed 'an army of hack writers', together with talentless timeservers and vulgar functionaries, were suffocating the last remaining voices of truth and honesty, and he longed to leave the capital for the provinces, to be away from this deadening milieu, off and on his own surrounded by the beauty of the Russian countryside. Finally, in the autumn of 1931, he quit his job with ROSTA, the Soviet press agency, and left Moscow for the village of Solotcha near Ryazan. He wrote at the time that it was 'pointless' to remain in Moscow any longer. He had at last become, in his words, 'a true writer [. . .] The time has come to speak "at the top of my voice".'[10] When not off travelling, Paustovsky spent most of the next decade in Solotcha writing several books inspired by Russian history and nature, most importantly *The Land of Meshchëra* (1939), works that while cherished by readers placed his oeuvre even further outside the literary mainstream.

With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Paustovsky was sent to report on the fighting near Tiraspol and Odessa. He was embedded with Soviet forces on the front lines and experienced vicious combat and aerial bombardments for six weeks running before being recalled to Moscow, where he continued to write pieces on the war effort for the Soviet press.[11]

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In an interview in 1959, Paustovsky said:

> Everything that I have written before [*The Story of a Life*] was a step on the way to this book, on which I continue to work even now. I dream of bringing it up to the current day, but fear I won't manage. Only now do I realise I that started on this project much too late.[12]

He began writing a still ill-defined autobiographical work in Solotcha in May 1943. Its roots, however, went back much further. While still a gymnasium student in Kiev he wrote a story about his experiences of a visit to Polesia that would become the basis for 'The Inn on the Braginka' in *The Faraway Years*. In the early 1920s, he wrote 'The Village of Kobrin', which he later reworked and included in *Restless Youth*. Additional chapters in *The Story of a Life* also started out as parts of other books.

In October 1945, Paustovsky published 'The Faraway Years: A Story of Childhood' in the journal *Novyi mir* ('New World'). This included roughly half of what would grow to become the complete first volume, which was published in book form late the following year. At this point, Paustovsky had no plans for continuing his memoir beyond his early youth and didn't return to the project for several years. The official reaction may have had something to do with this. *The Faraway Years* was met coldly by Soviet critics, and the publisher, Molodaia Gvardiia, even halted production of a second edition of the book just as it was about to go to print after powerful voices raised objections to the fact that 'this book is filled with lots of liberal kindliness and very little revolutionary wrath'.[13]

Readers, however, embraced Paustovsky's story. None more so than Ivan Bunin. Now the leading light of the Russian émigré community in France, Bunin, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1933, stumbled upon 'The Inn on the Braginka' in the journal *Vokrug sveta* ('Around the World'), where it had been published as a stand-alone piece in 1946. Bunin had long forgotten the budding writer who had sent him his early poems thirty years before, but he was so profoundly moved by Paustovsky's story that he sent him a postcard care of his publisher in Moscow to let him know of the 'rare joy' it had given him and that he considered it to be 'among the best stories in all of Russian literature'.[14] If he needed encouragement to carry on with his memoirs, Paustovsky could not have wished for more.

Restless Youth appeared in several instalments in *Novyi mir* in 1955. It was only now, a full decade after he began *The Faraway Years*, that Paustovsky came to see his memoir as a much bigger project. He wrote in *Novyi mir* that *Restless Youth* was part of a 'large autobiographical tale, the subject of which is the formation of a man and a writer', and that he intended to write two more books that would bring his life

up to the present day.[15] In late 1955, Sovetskii pisatel', the publishing house of the Soviet Writers' Union, issued volumes one and two together as *The Story of a Life*, the first time this title was used. Paustovsky completed the third volume in Tarusa over the course of 1956.

'This is a story,' Paustovsky wrote in 1958, 'not history. I am writing my autobiography adhering strictly to the principle of setting down only what I have witnessed myself. And so, in this story it is not possible to include descriptions of everything that happened in the particular place and time described in this book.'[16]

Paustovsky's choice of title, *Povest' o zhizni* in Russian, is significant – he was not writing a traditional autobiography or memoir, nor was he writing a history; rather, he was writing his *story*. The Russian word *povest'* has conveyed different meanings over time. If, for example, in the twelfth-century *Tale of Bygone Years – Povest' vremennykh let* – it signifies a historical chronicle of Kievan Russia's past, in more recent usage *povest'* implies a level of artistic creativity, licence even, that history, autobiography and memoir generally do not permit. A *povest'* in the modern meaning also refers to a literary work shorter in length than the typical novel. Thus, Tolstoy's novella *Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a *povest'*, as is Gogol's short story *The Overcoat*. In choosing the word *povest'* Paustovsky is signalling where his work is to be placed in the taxonomy of Russian literary genres, in terms both of the length of its constituent parts – *povesti*, in the plural – and of its debt to the deep structures of narrative that give shape to this reconstruction of his past.

'For all its naked autobiographism,' the literary scholar Lev Levitsky noted, 'this is not a documentary work but an artistic one, whose entire plan and every last detail are dictated by its overarching conception.' *The Story of a Life* is not a pedantic accounting of all the things Paustovsky experienced or the people he knew (indeed, his wives and children are not mentioned), rather it is a 'painstaking selection of material and its artistic generalisation'. The work moves forward less by the dictates of chronology and more by the power of memory, which gives it its episodic nature, what Levitsky has called 'a chain of recollections'.[17] The mysterious interworkings of experience, memory, and meaning that shape Paustovsky's *Story of a Life* are beautifully captured by a line from Gabriel García Márquez in his own autobiography, *Living to Tell the Tale*: 'Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.'[18]

The appearance of each new instalment of his magnum opus provided further proof of Paustovsky's ideological heresy. In 1956, Vasily Smirnov, a prominent official in the Soviet Writers' Union, denounced Paustovsky as a 'counterrevolutionary' in a meeting with a group of writers.[19] Two years later he was publicly attacked on the pages of the literary magazine *Zvezda* ('Star') in an article titled 'Notes on one Master's Party Spirit'. Paustovsky's writing was criticised as overly individualistic, lacking in *partiinost'* – full-throated support of the Communist Party, in other words – and as offering proof that much still needed to be done 'in the battle for ideological purity' in Soviet literature.[20] The criticism was neither unfair nor inaccurate: Paustovsky didn't care in the least about 'party spirit'. He never joined the Communist Party, or any other political party for that matter.

The attacks, however, frightened Alexander Tvardovsky, editor of *Novyi mir*, who refused to publish the fourth volume in 1958 unless Paustovsky made major changes. Tvardovsky wanted more heroic workers, politics and the glories of the early years of the Soviet Union and less 'poetic solitude, nature's beauty and the sea, and art for art's sake'. He detected in Paustovsky's writing an unwarranted 'pride' on the author's part, as though he were 'spitting upon "world history" from on high'. And he was especially upset at the many pages devoted to Babel. There was simply no way Tvardovsky would permit Paustovsky's 'apologetic' defence of Babel, who had been arrested and executed as a spy and enemy of the people in 1940, to appear in his journal. When Paustovsky received Tvardovsky's comments he was furious. He wrote to Tvardovsky that his remarks were motivated entirely by political rather than literary concerns and that his objection to the sections on Babel and his tragic death could only be explained by Tvardovsky's anti-Semitism. As this was a 'matter of conscience', Paustovsky refused to make the changes and instructed Tvardovsky to return the manuscript to him immediately.[21]

In the end, Paustovsky published this volume, *A Time of Great Hope*, and the next, *Southern Adventure*, in the journal *Oktiabr'* ('October') in 1959 and 1960, but only after its editors forced him to make considerable changes, albeit not to the extent demanded by Tvardovsky.[22] Nevertheless, he carried on with what had become his life's work, desperate to see it through to the end and unwilling to allow the critics or frightened editors to stop him.

'To be frank, we must admit that among us remain dour writers of memoirs, who look more to the past than to the present and the future,' observed the literary hack and Party loyalist Vsevolod Kochetov at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in October 1961. 'With their twisted outlook and with a zeal worthy of a better cause, they poke around in the refuse of their well-frayed

memories to unearth mouldering literary corpses and present them as something that still lives.'[23] It was obvious to the audience who Kochetov had in mind.

By the late 1950s, Paustovsky's health was in serious decline. He suffered from what was then diagnosed as severe asthma but was possibly chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, brought on by a lifetime of heavy smoking. In August 1960, he suffered the first of a series of heart attacks. He could barely manage more than a few hours of writing a day and worried he would never see his work through to the end. After the monthly *Znamia* ('Banner') refused to publish *A Book of Journeys*, the sixth and what would be the final volume, Paustovsky swallowed his pride and offered the manuscript to Tvardovsky. *Novyi mir* published it in 1963, but only after removing everything Paustovsky had to say about the barbarism of the Stalin years. Paustovsky's original text was cut in half.[24]

As a man and a writer who belonged to no camp, Paustovsky found himself attacked not only by the Soviet literary establishment but by dissidents as well. Varlam Shalamov, author of *Kolyma Tales*, who spent seventeen years in the Gulag, maligned *Kara-Bugaz* and *Kolkhida* for their silence about the use of convict labour in the construction of these industrial projects. Paustovsky, he wrote, had been blind to the horrors playing out right before his very eyes.[25] Setting aside the fact that Shalamov only thought to criticise Paustovsky the year before he died when he was far too ill to respond, there is an element of truth in his criticism. Paustovsky never was a dissident or an active foe of the Soviet state; nor did he ever claim to be. He had never been motivated by politics. As he himself admitted numerous times, he was a dreamer, an observer, a romantic, an individual who insisted on living according to his own terms. In his 1984 commencement speech at Williams College, Joseph Brodsky said: 'The surest defence against Evil is extreme individualism, originality of thinking, whimsicality, even – if you will – eccentricity. That is, something that can't be feigned, faked, imitated.'[26] This was Konstantin Paustovsky.

Paustovsky was not blind to the nature of the Soviet system, however. As early as 1920, he wrote in his diary:

> When the Civil War ended and the period of 'peaceful construction' began, everyone immediately saw that 'the emperor had no clothes' and the only power he had was to destroy and wage war. [. . .] The entire country has been turned into one of Arakcheev's military colonies. A new era has begun – the tempting of the intelligentsia, the academicians, the artists and the writers . . . Lord, let this cup pass me by.[27]

The lyrical romanticism of Paustovsky's prose blinded critics like Shalamov to just what it was he was saying in *The Story of a Life*, but the clues are unmistakable to the careful reader. Consider Paustovsky's handling of the two revolutions of 1917. The collapse of the Romanov dynasty is depicted as the great national liberation from centuries of autocratic oppression that it truly was. All of Russia came together to celebrate this new beginning and a wave of hope and possibility swept over the land. But, he writes, 'The idyllic generosity of the first days of the revolution faded. Entire worlds crumbled and collapsed into dust.' The Bolshevik seizure of power in October is not treated as the next step on the road to a better tomorrow, but as the brutal and senseless victory of an armed mob. There is nothing heroic in Paustovsky's passages about what he saw in Moscow that autumn. Rather, these pages are filled with accounts of wholesale theft, vandalism, anarchy, brutality and destruction. Paustovsky himself was caught in the violence, captured by Bolshevik forces, and nearly executed as a suspected supporter of the Provisional Government. The politics of the new Soviet government are characterised as 'harsh' and 'pitiless'. An aura of ambivalence hangs over his chapters recounting the first years of the regime. Even this volume's title – *The Dawn of an Uncertain Age*, the adjective being the key signifier here – leaves no doubt as to Paustovsky's attitude to the Bolshevik Revolution. He admits to being disturbed by the Bolsheviks' 'contempt for the culture of the past'. He refused to pick a side during the years of the civil war and not until 1920, with the collapse of the White armies, 'did I realise that there was no other path forward than the one chosen by my people'.

This is a shocking, and brave, admission for a Soviet author to make in 1956, especially for one who for years had been criticised for his ideological deviance. Questioning Stalin's cult of personality at the time was one thing; questioning the revolution itself, however, was taboo.

Paustovsky's disgust at the 'brutality, violence and sudden unreason of the twentieth century' reverberates throughout *The Story of a Life*, regardless of the regime, army or political party responsible. Children's skulls bashed in by men wielding rifles; women raped; Jews flayed alive by Ukrainian gangs; a monastery burned to the ground, the monks shot dead for a bit of silver; an orphan crushed by a frenzied crowd of starving refugees; the sugar-white bone of a young soldier's amputated leg. Such were the horrors Paustovsky experienced and described with unflinching honesty. He reminded readers of 'how thin was the veneer of civilisation that separated us from a bottomless sea of dark savagery'.

That savagery touched Paustovsky in the most personal of ways. Among the happiest moments in his life were the days spent with Uncle Nikolai and Aunt Maria at their home in Bryansk and then summers at their dacha in Rëvny. After Georgy Paustovsky left his family, Uncle 'Kolya' became a surrogate father to young Kostik. Paustovsky's love for his uncle flows from the pages of his book. In August 1919, Nikolai took his family to Moscow to escape the advance of General Anton Denikin's army. There he spent the next decade working in the Soviet arms industry until his arrest on 26 March 1929 as a foreign spy. He was executed on 21 October. The death warrant was signed by Genrikh Yagoda, deputy chairman of the OGPU, the Soviet secret police.[28]

In the Stalin years, 'enemies of the people' became non-persons. They disappeared and ceased to exist. Families burned their executed loved ones' letters and diaries, they removed their pictures from their photo albums, and if they still mentioned their names, then only in a whisper at night in the safety of their room when no one else might hear. And yet here is Paustovsky writing an effusive tribute to his beloved uncle, murdered as a traitor to his country, while the Soviet Union was still at war with Nazi Germany. Other victims of Stalin's terror are memorialised in these pages as well – the eccentric bibliophile Mikhail Shchelkunov, who was arrested as a Trotskyite and perished in the Gulag in 1938; the journalist Mikhail Koltsov, executed as an enemy of the state in 1940. One could add more names.

It's one of the remarkable things about Paustovsky that despite the horrors he witnessed, he never became cynical or bitter or defeated; rather he maintained his faith in humanity and his ability to appreciate life's infinite beauty. He referred to this as 'my tendency to see the good in all things', a trait others sometimes saw as a weakness. But Paustovsky couldn't help himself. It was who he was. He writes that while still a youth,

> I began to notice that the worse reality appeared, the more fully I could find all the good that was hidden inside it. I was beginning to realise that in life the good and the bad lie side by side. The good can often shine through a fog of lies, poverty and suffering, just like at the end of some rainy days the fire of the setting sun can pierce the grey clouds with its rays. I tried to find signs of the good everywhere.

He often found these signs in the most unexpected of places and people, like the poor old man in torn overalls he met in Moscow in the hungry year of 1918. The man tended a small kitchen garden that produced just enough to keep him alive, yet he was happy. 'So, you see, my friend,' he said to Paustovsky, 'it just so happens that this too is a way of life. There are all sorts of ways to live. You can fight for freedom, you can try to remake humanity or you can grow tomatoes. Everything has its own price, its own dignity and its own glory.'

Not sure he understood, Paustovsky asked him what exactly it was he was trying to say.

'That we need to be tolerant and understanding. As I see it, that's the only real path to freedom. All of us should devote ourselves to the work we like best, and no one should try to stop us.'

Tolerance, understanding, respect for the individual. These were dangerous notions in Paustovsky's world.

•

News of a forthcoming English translation of *The Story of a Life* appeared in 1961 in the *Sunday Times*, which described Paustovsky, then little known outside the USSR, as 'a great storyteller, a stylist of the rarest poetic beauty, and a man of simplicity and truth'.[29] When the first volume appeared three years later the praise was ecstatic. The *Sunday Times* again likened the writing to that of Gogol, Turgenev and Chekhov for its 'freshness of response'. The *Times Literary Supplement* dubbed Paustovsky the 'Russian Proust'. The *Observer* called *The Story of a Life* 'one of the supreme examples of autobiography [. . .] a small masterpiece [. . .] a classic of childhood'.[30] Reviewers praised the 'sense of the numinous wonder and delight' in Paustovsky's writing, 'its lyricism [and] the immediacy of the portraits of persons, places and events', and its 'limpid style [. . .] that is simple, unforced and self-effacing'. *The Times* noted how 'Everything he writes is stripped to the bone until nothing is left except what is vivid and necessary'.[31] (Indeed, Paustovsky laboured over his writing, producing draft after draft by hand, trimming, revising and cutting every unnecessary word, as his supremely illegible manuscripts reveal.[32])

The Story of a Life met with a similar reaction in the United States. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Helen Muchnic called the book 'profoundly moving, sometimes humorous, often horrifying' and singled out its 'passages of lyric beauty'.[33] The reviewer for the *New York Times* said it was one of the finest books by a Russian author he had ever read and highlighted the 'deceptively simple' quality of Paustovsky's prose that 'captures superbly the emotional atmosphere of a situation and an era'. As if that

were not enough of an endorsement, the review went on to declare that the greater response to Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* than to Paustovsky's masterpiece could only be characterised as a 'cosmic literary injustice'.[34]

Similar comments could be heard on the Continent. When Gallimard published the first four volumes in Paris in 1966, *Le Monde* praised its '*lyrisme délicat*' and called Paustovsky '*un génie du coeur*' – a genius of the heart.[35] The same year Heinrich Böll said that his entire family was reading the German translation and they were all utterly swept away by it. Discovering Paustovsky had been for Böll 'a true revelation'.[36]

Paustovsky's name was first raised in connection with the Nobel Prize in Literature in the Swedish press in 1962. The voices in support of Paustovsky inside the Swedish Academy grew, and by 1965 many in the literary world considered him to be the favourite to win. But the Swedes had their concerns. The previous year Anders Österling, permanent secretary of the academy, had been in favour of awarding the prize to Paustovsky when he was instructed by Gunnar Jarring, Sweden's ambassador to the USSR, that this would be viewed as a provocation by the Soviet government, which was still angry at Pasternak's win in 1958. Paustovsky, Jarring warned, was deeply unpopular among the Soviet leadership. As recently as April 1963, at a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev had gone on a tirade against Paustovsky over an article he had written years earlier for *Pravda* arguing against industrial development around Tarusa. The academy heeded Jarring's warning, and the 1964 award went to Jean-Paul Sartre instead.

Paustovsky was put forward again the following year, and once more voices were raised within the academy that giving the prize to him would cause an international scandal that Sweden ought to avoid. At the same time, the Soviet government was working frantic ally behind the scenes to convince the academy to give the prize to its approved candidate, Mikhail Sholokhov, best known as the author of *The Quiet Don*.

Paustovsky was in Rome in October 1965 as the world awaited the Swedish Academy's decision. The Italian press was busy trying to secure interviews with the man almost everyone assumed would be the winner. Paustovsky, however, harboured no illusions. Politics, not literary merit, would determine the matter. He told a friend that in light of the Pasternak affair the Swedes wouldn't give the award to 'another non-conformist Soviet writer'. Paustovsky was right. Days later Sholokhov was announced as the winner.

One of Paustovsky's biggest supporters in Sweden was the poet and critic Artur Lundkvist. He and his wife had met Paustovsky in the summer of 1962 when he was recovering from a heart attack outside Moscow:

> Marvellously dressed and well mannered, he met us on the veranda of the sanatorium. His sincerity was striking. He was open but at the same time uncommonly tactful, unlike the typical Soviet man. He had the defined, expressive features of someone who had gone through a great deal, although without a trace of cruelty. He had the eyes of a dreamer and a poet, yet clear and perceptive. Despite his heart trouble, he looked strong and youthful for his age, as though he would be more at home walking in the woods or in the thick of things rather than at his writing desk.

Although Paustovsky would be considered a finalist for the prize a total of four times, he never did win.[37]

On his famous visit to the Soviet Union in September 1962, the American poet Robert Frost insisted on meeting Paustovsky. He had quickly tired of the 'Intourist Russia' that was being paraded before him by his official hosts (thrumming factories, bountiful farms, technological marvels and so on) and wanted to sit down with a real writer for an honest, open conversation. From the moment Frost and his American guide, F. D. Reeve, arrived at Paustovsky's Moscow apartment, they were struck by 'an immediate sense of tranquil, cultured excellence'. Frost and Paustovsky recognised in each other kindred souls. When Frost told him about his need for freedom and isolation to write, Paustovsky replied that just like Henry David Thoreau, he had a small house in the woods to which he retreated to commune with nature. They traded stories of their youth when they had wandered about the country from one odd-job to the next. Frost tried to impress Paustovsky by telling him how he had even jumped freight trains and ridden in open boxcars. Paustovsky smiled and went him one better – he, too, he said, had jumped freight trains, although he had often been forced to ride on the tops of the boxcars. Frost laughed. The evening proved to be one of the highlights of his trip.[38]

By the last decade of his life Paustovsky had become one of the elder statesmen of Russian letters and a champion of artistic and intellectual freedom. Time and again he spoke out to defend writers against censorship and state oppression, from the attacks on Vladimir Dudintsev and his 1956 novel *Not by Bread*

Alone, to the campaigns against Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel, and Yury Galanskov and his colleagues in the so-called 'Trial of the Four' in 1968. He called for the passage of strict laws to protect Russia's natural environment, so terribly degraded by the Soviet regime, and when he learned that local officials in Karelia were planning to raze over a hundred ancient Russian Orthodox churches, he wrote a letter to Khrushchev insisting that this barbarism be stopped.[39]

Just as he had done in the 1930s when he defended the work and reputation of the officially unapproved writer Alexander Grin,[40] Paustovsky helped to publish the writings of Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova and Nadezhda Mandelshtam, and encouraged the careers of younger writers such as Bulat Okudzhava and Yury Kazakov in two influential and popular anthologies – *Literary Moscow* (1956) and *Pages from Tarusa* (1961) – publications that were denounced by the Writers' Union and Soviet officialdom as ideologically dangerous and quickly suppressed.[41]

Paustovsky was back in hospital in May 1968, for the last time. Nevertheless, he refused to remain silent. When official pressure was being exerted on the experimental Theatre on the Taganka and its brilliant lead director, Yury Lyubimov, Paustovsky telephoned Alexei Kosygin, first deputy premier of the Soviet Union: 'This is the dying writer Paustovsky on the phone,' he said. 'I implore you not to destroy our country's cultural treasures. If you fire Lyubimov, his theatre will collapse, and the great work they're doing there will perish.' Lyubimov kept his job, and the theatre was saved.[42]

In the last year of his life Paustovsky worked on the seventh volume of *The Story of a Life*. He died in Moscow on 14 July 1968 without managing to complete it. A brief testament was found in his writing desk: 'We lived on this earth. Don't entrust it into the hands of the destroyers, the barbarians and the ignoramuses. We are the heirs of Pushkin, and we will have to answer for that.'[43]

At the end of *Restless Youth*, Paustovsky wrote of his life in March 1917:

> I didn't know what would come next. But I knew that I would continue to strive with all my strength to become a writer. This would be my way of serving my people, of loving our magical language and our remarkable land. I would work as long as I could hold a pen and my heart, overflowing with the beauty of life, was still beating.
>
> He had kept his word.

—Douglas Smith

[1] Marlene Dietrich, *My Life*, translated by Salvator Attanasio (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 135–6, 221, 227; interview with Galina Arbuzova, Tarusa, Russia, 8 Sep. 2019; *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Home Service, 5 Jan. 1965, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p009y4dy, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

[2] 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia', *The Times*, 16 July 1968. On Paustovsky's popularity in the USSR, see Lev Lobov and Kira Vasil'eva, 'On otdal svoë serdtse Rossii', *Kul'tura*, 25:7638 (2008), http://www.peredelkino-land.ru/HTML/press_stroenie_stoyaschee_otdelno.shtml, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

[3] Interview with Galina Arbuzova, Tarusa, Russia, 8 Sep. 2019.

[4] Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Neskol'ko otryvochnykh myslei. Vmesto predisloviia,' in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967), 1:5–17.

[5] Konstantin Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii: povesti, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Dekom, 2002), 1:8.

[6] Ibid., 1:11; 'Iz dnevnikov', *Mir Paustovskogo*, 15 (2000).

[7] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:11; 'Put' k masterstvu', letter dated 24 Jul. 1929, *Mir Paustovskogo*, 25 (2007).

[8] S. Olivier, 'Paustovskii v nachale XXI veka', in V. A. Pimneva et al. (eds), *Literaturnoe nasledie K. G. Paustovskogo i mirovaia kul'tura* (Moscow: Moskovskii literaturnyi muzei-tsentr K. G. Paustovskogo, 2013), 18.

[9] Maksim Gorkii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1953), 27:108; Konstantin Paustovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957), 1:644–5. *Kara-Bugaz* appeared in English as *The Black Gulf* (London: Hutchinson, 1946).

[10] Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Neskol'ko grubykh slov', Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Collection 617, Inventory 1, Folder 58; 'Na puti k masterstvu', letters dated 2 Sep. 1929 and 28 Nov.

1931, *Mir Paustovskogo*, 25 (2007).

[11] Konstantin Paustovskii, 'Zhizn'', *Ogonëk*, 26 (1945), 5; A. Muravinskaia and V. Ashcheulov, 'Paustovskii na Altae', *Altai*, 4 (1982), 110–13.

[12] Konstantin Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni* (Moscow: TERRA, 2017), 1:550.

[13] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:16.

[14] Bunin's postcard, dated 15 Sep. 1947, is in the collection of the K. G. Paustovsky Museum in Moscow.

[15] *Novyi mir*, 3 (1955), 3.

[16] *Oktiabr'*, 3 (1959), 3.

[17] Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni*, 1:550–52.

[18] Epigraph to *Living to Tell the Tale* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

[19] Kornei Chukovskii, *Dnevnik, 1901–1969* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1994), 245.

[20] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 8–10.

[21] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 22–3; Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:19.

[22] Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Collection 1128, Inventory, 645, Folder 1 contains some of the many edits demanded of Paustovsky to volume five by *Oktiabr'* prior to publication.

[23] John Sendy, 'In Memory of Paustovsky', *Australian Left Review* (April–May 1969), 72.

[24] Galina Burlaeva, 'Literaturnyi arkhiv K. G. Paustovskogo v Moskovskom muzei-tsentre pisatelia', in Pimneva et al. (eds), *Literaturnoe nasledie*, 488; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 66–7.

[25] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 21 (2004), 97–100; also Olivier, 'Paustovskii v nachale XXI veka', 14–15.

[26] Joseph Brodsky, 'A Commencement Address', *New York Review of Books*, 16 Aug. 1984.

[27] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 7–23.

[28] V. A. Bobkov, 'Zhizn' i deiatel'nost' N. G. Vysochanskogo na Brianskoi zemle', *Vestnik Brianskogo gosuniversiteta*, 2 (2009), 6–11; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 15 (2000), 47–53.

[29] Vera Lindsay, 'Childhood under the Tsars', *Sunday Times*, 29 Jan. 1961.

[30] Raymond Mortimer, '"The greatest living Russian author" in England'; Vera and John Russell, 'A lifetime in revolution', *Sunday Times*, 27 Sep. 1964; 'Russian Proust', *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 May 1969; *Observer* quotes from advertisements in the *TLS*, 16 Feb. 1967, 125 and *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1964, 15.

[31] Jeremy Rundall, 'Draught of the South', *Sunday Times*, 16 Mar. 1969; 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia'; Lesley Branch, 'Jackals among the azaleas', *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1969; 'Paustovsky when young', *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1964; 'Self-portrait of an artist in years of revolution', *The Times*, 4 Nov. 1965; Iverach McDonald, 'Russia going red', *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1967.

[32] The manuscripts are in Moscow's Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.

[33] 'A Russian Soul', *New York Review of Books*, 20 Aug. 1964.

[34] Orville Prescott, 'Books of the Times: A Magnificent Surprise from Russia', *New York Times*, 1 Jul. 1964. See also Harrison E. Salisbury, 'Through the Tumult and the Thaw', *New York Times*. 3 May 1964.

[35] Piotr Rawicz, 'Une grande chronique de la révolution russe', *Le Monde*, 26 Mar. 1966.

[36] *Mir Paustovskogo*, 30 (2012), 33.

[37] A. M. Blokh, *Sovetskii Soiuz v inter'ere nobelevskikh premii: fakty, dokumenty, razmyshlenniia, komentarii* (St Petersburg: Gumanistika, 2001), 678–9, 724–8; Kjell Espmark, *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study behind the Criteria of the Choices* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 186; Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:21, 23; *Mir Paustovskogo*, 23 (2005), 65; Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 381.

[38] F. D. Reeve, *Robert Frost in Russia* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, [1964] 2001), 40, 45, 47–53.

[39] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:14, 19–24; Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 333, 502–3; Lobov and Vasil'eva, 'On otdal svoë serdtse Rossii', 46–76; 'Russians ask for review of trial', *The Times*, 16 Feb. 1968; 'Konstantin Paustovsky: lyrical writer of Russia'.

[40] On Paustovsky and Grin, see K. G. Paustovskii, 'Aleksandr Grin', *God XXII*, 15 (1939); 'Zhizn'

Aleksandra Grina', Konstantin Paustovsky website, http://paustovskiy-lit.ru/paustovskiy/public/zhizn-aleksandra-grina.htm, accessed 25 Feb. 2021; 'Uchastie Paustovskogo v izdanii sochinenii A. Grina', Konstantin Paustovsky website, http://paustovskiy-lit.ru/paustovskiy/bio/uchastiepaustovskogo-v-izdanii-grina.htm, accessed 11 Jan. 2021.

[41] *Literaturnaia Moskva: literaturno-khudozhestvennvyi sbornik Moskovskikh pisatelei* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1956); *Tarusskie stranitsy: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi illiustrirovannyi sbornik* (Kaluga: Kaluzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1961); Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:18, 20; Blokh, *Sovetskii Soiuz v inter'ere nobelevskikh premii*, 730.

[42] Chukovskii, *Dnevnik*, 444.

[43] Paustovskii, *Vremia bol'shikh ozhidanii*, 1:24.

RUSSIA AND
CENTRAL EUROPE, 1914
N
Helsinki
St Petersburg
Stockholm
BALTIC SEA
Riga
Moscow
R. Volga
Simbirsk
Danzig
Minsk
Mogilëv
BEL ORUSSIA
Yefremov
Bryansk
Baranovichi
R. Vistula
Berlin
GERMAN EMPIRE
Warsaw
Brest-Litovsk
POLESIA
RUSSIAN EMPIRE
Lublin
Chenstokhov
POLAND
Kiev
Belaya
Tserkov
Kharkov
Prague
R. San
Cherkassy
Gorodishche
AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN
EMPIRE
R. Dnieper
Yekaterinoslav
Vienna
UKRAINE
Yuzovka
Taganrog
Budapest
R. Volga
Odessa
Sea of
Asov
CRIMEA
ROMANIA
Sevastopol
Alushta
Novorossiisk
Bucharest
BLACK SEA
0
150 miles
0
300 km

THE STORY OF A LIFE

Book One
THE FARAWAY YEARS

My life, or did I dream you?

Sergei Yesenin

1

The Death of My Father

I was in my last year of school in Kiev when the telegram came saying that my father was dying on the farm at Gorodishche, near Belaya Tserkov. The next day I arrived at Belaya Tserkov and stopped at the house of my father's good friend Feoktistov, head of the local post office. He was a short-sighted old man with thick glasses and a long beard and wore a shabby old official's jacket with the brass insignia of the postal service, crossed horns and lightning bolts, on his lapels.

It was the end of March. Rain was coming down in a steady drizzle. Naked poplars stood shrouded in fog. Feoktistov told me that the ice on the swiftly flowing river Ros had gone out the night before. The farm where my father was dying was on an island in the middle of this river, twenty versts[1] from Belaya Tserkov. A stone causeway across the river led to the farm. Flood water was now pouring over the causeway in waves, and no one, of course, would agree to take me to the island, not even the most reckless of coachmen.

Feoktistov thought for a long time, contemplating which coachman in Belaya Tserkov was the most reckless. In the half-light of Feoktistov's drawing room his daughter Zina, a schoolgirl, sat diligently practising the piano. The music caused the leaves on the ficus to tremble. I stared at a pale, dried-out piece of lemon on a small dish and kept silent.

'Well, let's call Bregman, the old rascal,' Feoktistov finally decided. 'Nothing frightens him.'

Soon, into Feoktistov's study, overflowing with volumes of *The Planted Field* in their gold-tooled covers, walked Bregman the driver – 'the biggest rascal' in all of Belaya Tserkov. He was a dwarfish, thick-set Jew with a scraggy beard and the blue eyes of a cat. His weather-beaten cheeks were the red of heavenly apples. He twisted in his hands a small whip and listened, sceptically, to Feoktistov.

'Oy, what a misfortune!' he said at last in a falsetto voice. 'Oy, what bad luck, Pan Feoktistov! My carriage is light, and my horses are weak. Gypsy horses! They won't pull us across the causeway. We'll all drown – the horses, the carriage, the young man and the old driver. And they won't even bother so much as to print a word about it in *Kievan Thought*. Well, that's just unbearable, Pan Feoktistov. Go? Well, of course, we can go. Why not? You yourself know a driver's life is worth no more than three silver roubles – or maybe five, or let's say ten, I won't argue.'

'Thank you, Bregman,' said Feoktistov. 'I knew you'd be willing. You're the bravest man in Belaya Tserkov. For this I'll buy you a subscription to *The Planted Field* for the rest of the year.'

'Well, if I'm really so brave,' Bregman laughed with a squeak, 'then you'd better make it *The Russian Invalid*. At least there I can read all about the young soldiers and the knights of St George. The horses will be at your door in an hour, Pan.' Bregman left.

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There had been a strange sentence in the telegram I received in Kiev: 'Bring a priest with you from Belaya Tserkov, either Orthodox or Roman Catholic, it doesn't matter, just so long as he comes.' I knew my father and so the sentence bothered and upset me. My father was an atheist. His jokes about priests of both confessions had led to endless clashes with my grandmother, a Pole and a religious fanatic like so many Polish women.

I guessed that my father's sister, Feodosia Maximovna, or, as everyone called her, Aunt Dozia, had insisted on the priest. She rejected all church rites except absolution. She had replaced the Bible with Shevchenko's *Kobzar*,[2] which she kept hidden in an iron-bound trunk and which was just as yellowed and wax-splattered as a Bible. Sometimes at night Aunt Dozia would take it out and read 'Katerina' by candlelight, constantly dabbing her eyes with a dark kerchief. She grieved over Katerina's fate, so similar to her own. In the damp grove behind her cottage was the grave, covered in greenery, of her son, 'the little fellow', who had died many years ago when Aunt Dozia was still quite young. This boy had been, as people used to say, her 'unlawful' son. The man Aunt Dozia loved had betrayed her. He left her, but she remained true to him until death, and she kept waiting for him to return to her. For some reason she was certain he was sick, penniless, ill-fated, and she, after having cursed him out as he deserved, would in the

end take him back and treat him with kindness.

•

None of the Orthodox priests would go to Gorodishche, claiming to be sick or too busy. Only one young Catholic priest was willing to go. He warned me that we'd first have to stop at the church for the Holy Sacrament needed for the dying man's last rites, and that no one was allowed to speak with someone carrying the Holy Sacrament. The priest wore a long, pleated overcoat with a velvet collar and a strange round hat, which was also black. It was gloomy and cold inside the church. Wilted red paper roses hung at the base of the crucifix. Without candles, without the ringing of bells, without the rolling of the organ, the church had the appearance of the wings of a theatre by dull daylight.

At first we rode in silence. There was only the sound of Bregman smacking his lips and hurrying on his gaunt bays. He shouted at them as all drivers do – 'G'on' and 'Ya!' The unkempt gardens echoed with the sound of the rain. The priest held the pyx which had been wrapped in black serge. My grey school overcoat became soaked through and turned black. Out of the mist the famous Alexandria Gardens of Countess Branitskaya appeared to reach all the way up to the sky.[3] These were extensive gardens, equal in size, Feoktistov told me, to those at Versailles. The snow there was melting, wrapping the trees in cold mist. Turning round, Bregman said there were wild deer in the gardens.

'Mickiewicz loved these gardens very much,'[4] I told the priest, having forgotten he had to keep silent the whole way. I had wanted to say something pleasant as a way of thanking him for agreeing to come on this difficult and dangerous trip. The priest smiled in reply.

Rainwater stood in the sodden fields, reflecting the jackdaws flying overhead. I raised the collar of my coat and thought of my father, about how little I knew him. He had been a statistician and had worked nearly his entire life on various railways – the Moscow–Brest, Petersburg–Warsaw, Kharkov–Sevastopol and South-Western lines. We had moved often from town to town – from Moscow to Pskov, then to Vilnius, and finally to Kiev. Father always had trouble getting along with his superiors. He was touchy and hot-tempered but a kind man. A year earlier my father had left Kiev and taken a job as a statistician at a factory in Bryansk, in Orël province. He had not been there long when he quite unexpectedly quit his job for no good reason and returned to my grandfather's old farm at Gorodishche. His brother, Ilko, a village teacher, lived there, along with Aunt Dozia.

My father's inexplicable act upset all his relatives, my mother most of all. At the time she was living in Moscow with my eldest brother. A month after arriving at Gorodishche my father fell ill, and now he was dying.

The road ran downhill through a ravine. At the road's end could be heard the persistent sound of rushing water. Bregman began to fidget up in his box. 'The causeway!' he said, sombrely. 'Now's the time for my passengers to pray!'

The causeway suddenly came into view around a bend in the road. The priest made to stand up and grabbed Bregman by his faded red sash. The water was rushing fast between the granite rocks. At this spot the Ros breaks through the Avratinska Hills with a fury. The water was flowing over the causeway in a clear wave, cascading down like thunder and filling the air with a cold spray. Across the river, on the far side of the causeway, the enormous poplars seemed to practically leap into the sky, and one could make out a small white house. I recognised the farm on the island where I had lived as a small boy – its thickets and wattle fences, the tall yokes beside the wells, and the rocks by the riverbanks. They cut the river into separate, powerful streams. Long ago my father and I had fished for whiskered gudgeon from those rocks.

Bregman stopped the horses near the causeway, climbed down, straightened the harness with the handle of his whip, looked at his carriage doubtfully, and shook his head. At that moment the priest finally broke his oath of silence.

'Jesus-Maria!' he uttered in a low voice. 'How are we going to get across?'

'Ahh, how should I know?' Bregman replied. 'Just sit quiet. The horses are already shaking all over.'

The horses threw back their heads, snorted, and then walked into the rushing water. It roared and knocked the light carriage to the unguarded side of the causeway. The carriage shifted at an angle and began to move sideways, its metal wheels screeching. The horses trembled, tried to steady themselves, and nearly lay down in the water to keep from being swept away. Bregman swung his whip over their heads. Halfway across the causeway, where the current was strongest, making a loud ringing sound, the horses came to a stop. The foaming rapids beat against their thin legs. Bregman let out a wail and began to whip the horses mercilessly. They moved backwards, pushing the carriage to the very edge of the causeway. Then I caught sight of Uncle Ilko. He was galloping on a grey horse from the farm to the causeway. He was yelling something and waving a coil of thin rope over his head.

He rode up onto the causeway and tossed Bregman the rope. Bregman hurriedly tied it to something under the carriage box, and then the three horses – two bays and a grey – finally dragged the carriage onto the island. The priest crossed himself with a sweeping gesture. Bregman winked at Uncle Ilko and said that folks would long remember such a fine driver as that old Bregman. I asked about my father.

'Still alive,' Ilko replied, and kissed me, scratching my face with his beard. 'He's waiting for you. But where's your mother, Maria Grigorievna?'

'I sent her a telegram in Moscow. She should arrive tomorrow.'

Uncle Ilko looked at the river. 'It's still rising,' he said. 'That's bad, my dear Kostik. Well, perhaps that's the worst of it. Let's go!'

We were met on the porch by Aunt Dozia, all in black, her eyes dried out from so much crying. The stuffy rooms smelled of mint. At first I did not recognise my father in the yellowed old man with the grey stubble on his cheeks. My father was only fifty years old. I had always remembered him as a slightly stooped but well-built man, elegant, dark-haired with an unusually sad smile and attentive grey eyes.

Now he sat in his chair, breathing heavily, and looking intently at me, a lone tear running down his dry cheek. It stuck on his beard, and Aunt Dozia wiped it away with a clean handkerchief. My father couldn't speak. He was dying of throat cancer. I sat by my father all night. Everyone else slept. The rain stopped. The stars shone sullenly outside the windows. The river raged ever louder. The water kept rising. Bregman and the priest could not get back and were now trapped on the island. My father stirred in the middle of the night and opened his eyes. I leaned over him. He tried to put his arms around my neck but couldn't and then said in a raspy whisper: 'I fear . . . your lack of character . . . will be the ruin of you.'

'No,' I replied. 'That won't happen.'

'When you see your mama,' he whispered. 'I failed her . . . May she forgive me . . .'

He grew quiet and weakly squeezed my hand. At the time I did not understand his words, and only much later, after many years, did their bitter meaning become clear to me. I also came to understand much later that my father had never really been a statistician at all, but a poet. He died towards dawn, but at first I didn't realise this. It seemed to me that he had quietly fallen asleep.

An old man named Nechipor lived with us on the island. We called him to come and read the psalms over Father. Nechipor frequently broke off his readings to go out into the front hall and smoke his cheap tobacco. There in a whisper he'd tell me the simple stories that stirred his imagination – about a bottle of wine he'd drunk the previous summer at Belaya Tserkov, about how he'd seen Skobelev himself,[5] so close in fact 'as that hedge right there', at Plevna, about an amazing American threshing machine powered by a lightning rod. Old man Nechipor was, as they said on the island, 'a simple man' – a liar and a gasbag. He read the psalms all day and throughout the following night, picking wax off the sides of the candles with his black fingernails, falling asleep where he stood, snorting himself awake, and then carrying on with his mumbled prayers.

That night someone on the other side of the river began yelling and waving a lantern. I went to the riverbank with Uncle Ilko. The river was raging. The water raced over the causeway in an icy cascade. It was late and dark, not a single star shone over our heads. The wind blew the raw freshness of the flood and thawing earth into our faces. And the whole time someone on the far bank kept shouting and waving a lantern, but not a word could be made out over the noise of the river.

'That must be Mama,' I said to Uncle Ilko, but he did not respond.

'Let's go,' he said, and then was quiet. 'It's cold out here on the banks. You'll catch cold.'

I didn't want to go back to the house. Uncle Ilko was silent for a while and then left, but I stayed and kept watching the lantern in the distance. The wind blew ever stronger, bending the poplars, and carrying the slightly sweet smoke of burning straw from somewhere far off. We buried Father in the morning. Nechipor and Uncle Ilko dug a grave in the grove on the edge of the ravine. From there one could make out the woods beyond the Ros in the distance and the whitish March sky. We carried the coffin from the house on wide, embroidered straps. The priest walked in front. He looked straight ahead with his calm, grey eyes and murmured Latin prayers.

Once we got the coffin out onto the steps, I caught sight on the far side of the river of an old carriage with some untethered horses and a small woman in black – Mama. She was standing motionless on the riverbank. She saw that we were carrying Father from the house. She dropped to her knees and her head fell to the ground. The tall, gaunt driver went up and leaned over her. He said something, but she just lay there, not moving. Then she jumped up and began running along the bank towards the causeway. The driver grabbed her. She sank helplessly to the ground and covered her face with her hands.

We carried Father along the road to the grave. At the bend, I turned to look. Mama was still sitting with her face buried in her hands. We were all silent, but Bregman kept slapping his whip against the

side of his boot. By the graveside the priest lifted his eyes to the cold sky and then said clearly and slowly in Latin: '*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis*!' Grant unto him eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

Then the priest fell silent and listened. The river roared and overhead the tomtits called to each other in the branches of the old elms. The priest sighed and began to speak again about man's eternal longing for happiness and the valley of tears. These words were remarkably fitting for my father's life. They made my heart ache. Ever since I have often felt that same pain when confronting this thirst for happiness and the imperfection of human relations. The river kept on roaring, the birds whistled cautiously, and as the coffin was slowly lowered on its straps into the grave it knocked loose clods of damp earth. I was then seventeen.

[1] A verst (*versta*) was equal to 1.06 kilometres or 0.66 miles.

[2] A book of poems published in 1840 by Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–61).

[3] Countess Alexandra Branitskaya (1754–1838), niece of Prince Grigory Potëmkin.

[4] Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), Polish poet and dramatist and national hero.

[5] Mikhail Skobelev (1843–82), famous Russian general and victor of the Siege of Plevna (1877) against the Ottoman Turks.

2

My Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich

I remained at Gorodishche for a few days after my father's funeral. Only the following day, after the water had gone down, could my mother cross the causeway. Mother looked haggard, her face dark, and though she had stopped crying, still she sat for hours at Father's grave. It was too early for fresh flowers, so we'd decorated the grave with paper peonies. Girls from the neighbouring village had made them. They loved to braid these peonies into their hair together with silk ribbons of various colours.

Aunt Dozia tried to comfort and distract me. She dragged a trunk filled with old things out of the store room. The lid made a loud creak. Inside I found a yellowed hetman charter in Latin, a copper seal with a coat of arms, a St George's medal from the Turkish War, a book of dream interpretations, a few smoked-out pipes and some incredibly fine black lace.

The charter and seal had remained in our family since the time of Hetman Sahaidachny, a distant ancestor. My father had laughed about our 'hetman origins' and loved to say that our grandfathers and great-grandfathers had tilled the soil and been the most ordinary and long-suffering of peasants, even though they believed themselves to be the descendants of Zaporozhian Cossacks. When the Zaporozhian Sich[1] was disbanded by Catherine the Great, some of the Cossacks settled on the banks of the Ros, near Belaya Tserkov. The Cossacks reluctantly became farmers. Their wild past continued to simmer in their blood for a long time. Even I, born at the end of the nineteenth century, heard the old-timers' tales of the bloody battles with the Poles, campaigns against the Turks, the 'Uman Slaughter' and the Chyhyryn Hetman.

Having filled ourselves with these stories, my brothers and I would fight our own Zaporozhian battles. We'd play in the ravine behind the farm, out by the fence that was densely overgrown with thistles. In the heat their red flowers and prickly leaves gave off a sickly sweet smell. The clouds would hover in the sky over the ravine – lazy and puffy, true Ukrainian clouds. So powerful are childhood impressions that ever since those days every battle against the Poles and Turks is linked in my imagination with that wild field, overgrown with thistles, and its dusty, intoxicating aroma. And the thistle flowers themselves reminded me of clots of Cossack blood.

With the years the Zaporozhians' hot-bloodedness cooled. During my childhood it was only evident in the ruinous lawsuits that went on for years against Countess Branitskaya over every little piece of land, in the persistent poaching, and in the Cossack folk songs. Our grandfather Maxim Grigorievich would tell them to us, his grandchildren.

Small, grey-haired, with kind dull eyes, he lived every summer with his beehives out beyond the meadow to avoid the wrathful nature of my Turkish grandmother. Long ago my grandfather had been an oxcart driver. He had gone as far as Perekop and Armyansk for salt and dried fish. It was from him I first heard that somewhere beyond the light blue and golden steppes around Yekaterinoslav and Kherson lay the heavenly land of Crimea. Before becoming a driver he had served in Nicholas's army, fought in the Turkish War, been captured and then returned from the town of Kazanlak in Thrace with a wife – a beautiful Turkish woman. Her name was Fatma. Upon marrying my grandfather, she adopted Christianity and a new name: Honorata.

We feared our Turkish grandmother no less than our grandfather did, and we tried to stay out of her sight. Sitting among the yellow pumpkin blossoms near his hut, Grandfather would sing in his trembling tenor the old Cossack songs and the ballads of the oxcart drivers or tell us all sorts of stories. I loved the drivers' songs for their plaintive spirit. You could sing such songs for hours on end to the squeaking wheels, lying on your cart, staring at the heavens. The Cossack songs always evoked a strange sadness. To me they sounded either like the cry of captives in Turkish chains or valiant battle hymns to be sung to the sound of horses' hooves.

Our favourite of Grandfather's stories was the tale of Ostap the lyrist. I don't know whether you've ever seen a Ukrainian lyre. Now you can probably only find them in museums, but in those days you would see blind lyre players not only at small-town markets but even in Kiev itself. They'd walk with their hand on the shoulder of their guide, a barefoot boy in a sackcloth shirt. On their backs they'd carry a canvas sack with bread, onions and salt in a clean rag, and a lyre hung across their chests. It looked

like a violin, but had a handle attached to it and a wooden rod with a small wheel. The lyre player would turn the handle round and round, the wheel would spin, rubbing against the strings that would vibrate in different keys, as if he were being accompanied by a swarm of friendly bumblebees buzzing around him.

The lyrists almost never sang. Rather, they performed their folk songs, ballads and psalms in a sing-song recitative. Then they stopped and would listen to the buzzing sound of the lyre as it slowly died away, after which, looking about with their unseeing eyes, they begged for alms. They didn't beg like most paupers. I recall one lyre player in Cherkassy. 'Toss us, a poor blind man and his little boy, a half-kopeck,' he'd say, 'for without him the blind man will lose his way and won't find the path to God's Kingdom when the time comes.'

I can't recall a single market without a lyre player. He'd sit leaning up against a dusty poplar. Compassionate women would crowd around and sigh as they dropped their greenish copper coins in his wooden bowl. The image of the lyre players has remained forever linked for me with the memory of the Ukrainian markets – markets held early in the morning, when the dew still glistens on the grass, cold shadows lie across the dusty roads, and bluish smoke wafts over the earth, already lit by the sun.

Misty stoneware jugs of ice-cold milk, wet marigolds in pails of water, pots of buckwheat honey, hot cheesecakes with raisins, sieves with cherries, the smell of sea roach, the languid ringing of church bells, the impetuous haggling of the market women, the lacy parasols of the young provincial ladies of fashion, and the sudden bang of a copper kettle carried on the shoulders of some Romanian with wild eyes – every old man considered it his duty to knock on the kettle with the handle of his whip to see whether Romanian copper really was any good.

I know the story of Ostap the lyrist practically by heart. 'It happened in the village of Zamoshye near the town of Vasilkov,' Grandfather told us. 'Ostap was the village blacksmith. His smithy was at the edge of the village under some dark, brooding willows overhanging the river. Ostap could make anything – horseshoes, nails, axles for ox-carts. One summer evening Ostap was stoking the coals in his smithy when a thunderstorm broke, scattering leaves into the puddles and blowing down an old willow. Ostap stoked the coals and suddenly he heard the heavy pounding of horses' hooves coming to a stop by his forge. A voice – young and female – called the blacksmith.

'Ostap went out and froze – at the very doors of the smithy pranced a black steed, and on it sat a woman of heavenly beauty, in a black velvet dress, with a switch, and a veil over her face. Her eyes were laughing behind the veil. Her teeth were laughing too. The velvet of her dress was soft and dark, and upon it sparkled raindrops that had fallen onto the woman from the dark willows after the rain. And next to her on another steed sat a young officer. At the time a regiment of uhlans was quartered at Vasilkov.

'"My dear blacksmith," said the woman, "shoe my horse, he's lost a shoe. The road is terribly slippery after the storm."

'The woman got down from the saddle and sat on a log, and Ostap began to shoe the horse. As he worked, he couldn't stop stealing glances at the woman, and then suddenly she became agitated, threw off her veil and returned Ostap's glances.

'"I've never met you before," Ostap said to her. "Maybe you're not from around here?"

'"I am from St Petersburg," answered the woman. "You're very good at your work."

'"Shoeing a horse is nothing!" Ostap said to her softly. "I can forge something out of iron for you finer than anything any empress has."

'"What sort of thing?" the woman asked.

'"Whatever you want. Well, for example, I can make you the most delicate rose with leaves and thorns."

'"Wonderful!" replied the woman just as softly. "Thank you, blacksmith. I shall come for it in a week."

'Ostap helped her back up into the saddle. She gave him a gloved hand to steady herself, and Ostap was overcome by emotion. He clung to her hand fervently. Before she could pull her hand away, the officer struck Ostap across the face with his switch and yelled: "Know your place, peasant!"

'The horses reared and galloped off. Ostap grabbed his hammer to throw at the officer but had to put it down. So much blood was running down his face that he couldn't see a thing. The officer had injured one of his eyes. But Ostap didn't let this stop him, and he worked on the rose for six days. Various people came to see it and they all agreed that even in the land of Italy you couldn't find such craftsmanship. On the night of the seventh day, someone quietly rode up to the smithy, dismounted and tied their horse to the fence. Ostap was afraid to go out or to even show his face – he covered his eyes with his hands and waited. He heard light footsteps and breathing, and someone's warm arms embraced him, and a single warm tear fell on his shoulders.

'"I know, I know everything," the woman said. "My heart has been aching these past days. Forgive me, Ostap. I am the cause of your great misfortune. I've driven my fiancé away and am now leaving for St

Petersburg."

'"But why?" Ostap asked.

'"My dear, my love," said the woman, "no matter what, people will never let us live in peace."

'"As you wish," Ostap replied. "I'm a simple man, a blacksmith. Just thinking of you brings me joy."

'The woman took the rose, kissed Ostap and slowly rode off. Ostap went to his door, watched her go and listened. Twice the woman stopped her horse. Twice she wanted to turn round and go back. But she did not. The stars in the sky danced over the valleys and fell upon the steppe, as if the night sky itself were weeping over their love. So it was, my boy!'

Grandfather always fell silent at this point in the story. I sat afraid to move. Then I'd ask in a whisper: 'And they never saw each other again?'

'No,' Grandfather would answer. 'That's right, never again. Ostap began to lose his sight. He thought about going all the way to St Petersburg to see this woman before going blind. And he did walk all the way to the tsar's capital, only to learn that she had died – possibly because she couldn't bear their separation. Ostap found her tombstone of white marble in a graveyard there. He looked and then his heart broke – on the marble lay his iron rose. The woman had instructed that it be placed on her grave. Ostap took up the lyre and most likely died out on the high road or perhaps under his cart in some market town. Amen!'

Listening to Grandfather's story, Ryabchik, a shaggy dog with burrs stuck to his muzzle, yawned loudly. I gave him an angry nudge in the side, but far from taking offence, Ryabchik nuzzled up looking to be patted and licking me with his hot tongue. Ryabchik had only a few broken teeth left in his mouth. Last autumn, as we were leaving Gorodishche, he bit down on one of the wheels – he wanted to stop our carriage – and broke all his teeth.

Oh, Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich! I owe some of my excessive impressionability and romanticism to him. They turned my youth into a series of collisions with reality. This caused me suffering, but still I knew my grandfather was right, and that a life based on soberness and common sense might be good for others, but for me would be burdensome and fruitless. 'One man's meat is another man's poison,' Grandfather liked to say. Maybe that's why my grandfather could not get along with my grandmother or, more accurately, hid from her. Her Turkish blood did not give her one attractive trait, except for her beautiful yet formidable physical appearance.

My grandmother was a tyrant and a nag. She smoked at least a pound of the strongest tobacco a day in her small, scorching-hot pipes. She ran the household, and her black eyes noticed the slightest disorder in the house. On holidays she'd put on a satin dress fringed with black lace, go out and sit on the small earthen mound by the house, smoke her pipe, and watch the rapid waters of the Ros. Now and then, deep in thought, she'd let out a loud laugh, but no one ever dared to ask what she was laughing at.

The only thing we liked about her was a hard, pink bar that looked like soap. She kept it hidden in her chest of drawers. Once in a while she'd proudly take it out and let us smell it. The bar gave off the faintest smell of roses. My father told me that a valley near Kazanlak, Grandmother's hometown, was called the 'Valley of Roses', and that this miraculous bar was impregnated with attar of roses from there. A Valley of Roses! The words alone stirred my imagination. I could not understand how such poetic places could produce a soul as stern as my grandmother.

[1] The Zaporozhian Sich, a loose, semi-autonomous political structure created by Cossacks on the lower reaches of the river Dnieper, lasted for several hundred years until it was absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1775.

3

Carp

Stuck in Gorodishche after the death of my father, I recalled my early childhood, those times when we, happy and carefree, would come to stay for the summer from Kiev. Mother and Father were young then, and Grandfather and his Turkish wife were still alive. I was still just a little boy and loved to make up all kinds of fanciful tales.

The train from Kiev arrived in Belaya Tserkov in the evening. Father hurried out into the station square to hire one of the garrulous drivers. We reached Gorodishche in the middle of the night. Half asleep I heard the tiresome jangling of the springs, then the noise of the water near the mill, and the barking of dogs. The horses snorted. The wattle fences creaked softly. The endless stars shone in the sky, and out of the damp darkness came the smell of weeds. Aunt Dozia carried me, half asleep, into the warm cottage with its coloured rugs spread out over the floor. The cottage smelled of warm milk. I opened my eyes for a moment and saw in front of me the rich embroidery on Aunt Dozia's snow-white sleeves.

The hot sun beating against the white walls woke me in the morning. Red and yellow hollyhocks swayed outside the open window. A nasturtium peeped inside the room; a furry bee had crawled into the flower and become stuck. I froze and watched as it angrily struggled to back its way out and fly off. Soft, bright waves of light reflected from the river rippled endlessly across the ceiling. The river rushed noisily nearby. Then I heard funny Uncle Ilko's voice: 'Well, as usual, the sun's barely up, but the parade's already begun! Dozia, put the cakes and the cherry brandy on the table!'

I jumped out of bed and ran barefoot to the window. A line of old men in large straw hats, tapping the ground with their knotty sticks, the medals on their brown tunics clanking and glistening in the sun, was slowly making its way over the causeway from the other side of the river. These venerable elders from the neighbouring village of Pilipchi had come to welcome us upon our successful arrival. Leading the way with the copper badge of his office hanging from his neck was the pock-marked Mayor Trofim.

The cottage sprang to life. Aunt Dozia tossed a cloth over the table, sending a rush of air through the room. Mama hurriedly piled cakes on the plates and sliced sausage. Father pulled the corks from the bottles of homemade cherry brandy, while Uncle Ilko set out the sturdy glass tumblers. Then Aunt Dozia and Mama ran off to change and Father and Uncle Ilko went out onto the porch to meet the elders who were approaching, as solemnly and inevitably as fate itself.

At last the elders arrived, and, after silently exchanging kisses with my father and uncle, they sat down on the low stone ledge amid a chorus of heavy sighs. Then Mayor Trofim, once he had cleared his throat, uttered his traditional greeting: 'I have the distinct honour of welcoming you, Georgy Maximovich, most respectfully to our quiet corner of the country.'

'Thank you!' said my father.

'Yes-s-s!' the elders replied immediately, sighing with relief. 'Yes, of course, as it should be.'

'Yes-s-s!' repeated Trofim, peering through the window at the sparkling bottles on the table.

'That's the way it is,' added an old soldier from the era of Tsar Nicholas I with a crooked nose.

'Quite naturally,' chimed in a small, curious old man by the name of Nedolya. He was the father of twelve daughters, but in his old age he had forgotten most of their names and could only remember five of them by counting on his fingers: *Hannah, Parasya, Gorpyna, Olesya, Frosya* . . . And then here the old man would get confused and have to start all over again.

'Yes, indeed!' the elders said and then fell silent for a time.

At this point Grandfather Maxim Grigorievich came out of the cottage. The elders got up and bowed down low. Grandfather bowed in return. After yet another round of loud sighs, the old men sat back down, grunted and stared silently at the ground. Finally, Uncle Ilko, having read some mysterious signs imperceptible to the rest of us that the meal was now ready, said: 'Well, my good men, thank you for this conversation. And now let us partake of what God has provided us.'

Mama, in a fine summer dress, greeted the men inside. Each of them kissed her hand, and, as was the custom, she kissed theirs, wrinkled and brown, in return. Beautiful Aunt Dozia, rosy-cheeked and prematurely grey, wearing a blue dress and a shawl embroidered with crimson flowers, bowed at the

waist.

After the first glass of the syrupy cherry brandy, Nedolya, tortured with curiosity, began asking his questions. He was bewildered by the things we had brought with us from Kiev and, pointing at each one, asked: ‘What’s this here? What’s it for? What do you say it’s called?’

Father then explained to him – this here is a brass steam iron, and this is an ice cream maker, and over there on the commode, that’s a folding mirror.

Nedolya shook his head with amazement: ‘There’s a tool for everything!’

‘Yes, of course, so there is!’ the elders agreed as they drank up.

Summer came into its own at Gorodishche – hot summers with terrifying thunderstorms, rustling trees, currents of cool river water, fishing outings, blackberry picking, and the sweet sensation of carefree days filled with surprises.

The island on which Grandfather had built his cottage was, of course, the most mysterious place in the world. There were two large, deep ponds behind the house. Their dark waters and the surrounding old willows gave the place a gloomy feel. On the hill beyond the ponds stood an impenetrable tangle of nut trees. Beyond the trees stretched several meadows filled with flowers up to your waist whose fragrance on a sultry day was enough to give you a headache. Past the meadows a thin trail of smoke rose from Grandfather’s crude hut by the beehives. And beyond the hut lay unexplored lands – rocky hills of red granite covered in creeping vines and wild strawberries. There were small pools of rainwater amid the rocky hollows. Little wagtails, shaking their bright feathers, drank the warm water in these pools. Cheeky bumblebees, having clumsily splashed down into the water, spun around and buzzed, vainly calling for help.

The rocks ended in a steep cliff above the Ros. We were forbidden from going this far, but once in a while we crawled out to the edge of the cliff and looked down. The sight of the torrent of clear water rushing down the Ros made our heads spin. Just below the surface of the water, skinny fish, struggling against the current, slowly made their way upstream.

Spread out along a slope on the far side of the river was the forest preserve of Countess Branitskaya. The green forest was so thick the sun could not penetrate it. It was rare when a ray of sunlight managed to break through the trees to reveal the amazing forest depths. Little birds darted into the beam like twinkling dust motes. They chirped as they chased each other and then dived into the leaves as if into green water.

But the ponds were my favourite place to visit.

Father went there to fish every morning, and he took me with him. We went out very early, moving slowly through the heavy, wet grass. Catching the first light of day, the willow branches shone like tranquil slivers of gold amid the dark, as yet nocturnal foliage. The carp splashed, disturbing the quiet water. Clumps of water lilies, knotweed and arrowhead hung as though suspended somehow above a black abyss.

This mysterious world of water and weeds opened itself before me. I was so enchanted by this world that I could have sat on the banks from sunrise to sunset.

Father would silently cast his line and light a cigarette. The smoke drifted over the water and wound through the rushes. I gathered a pail of water from the pond, threw in a handful of weeds, and waited. Red floats rested motionless on the surface of the water. Then one of them would begin to tilt, creating slight ripples, before either diving to the bottom or shooting to one side. Father hooked a fish, the line tightened, the wooden rod bowed into an arc and then a thrashing, splashing row erupted in the haze over the pond. The ripples rocked the lilies and sent the pond skaters scuttling in all directions, and then, finally, out of the mysterious depths there appeared a quivering streak of gold. It was impossible to know just what it was until Father landed the heavy carp on the trampled grass. It lay on its side gasping for air and moving its fins. The carp’s scales smelled of a wondrous, underwater realm.

I dropped the fish in the pail. It thrashed about among the weeds, smacking its tail all of a sudden and splashing me with water. I licked the water from my lips and felt a deep urge to drink from the pail, but Father wouldn’t let me.

It seemed to me that the water in the pail with the carp and the weeds tasted as delicious and refreshing as rainwater. We little boys loved to drink rainwater and we believed it could make you live to the age of one hundred and twenty. At least that’s what Nechipor always said.

4

Pleurisy

Thunderstorms at Gorodishche were common. They began on the peasant festival of Ivan Kupala and lasted all July. They besieged the island with enormous multi-coloured clouds, which flashed and crashed, shaking the house and frightening Aunt Dozia half to death.

These storms are connected with the memory of my first childhood love affair. I was nine years old at the time. On the festival of Ivan Kupala the girls from Pilipchi arrived on the island in their finest dresses like a brightly feathered flock of birds to float wreaths down the river. They wove the wreaths out of wild flowers. In the centre of each wreath, they affixed a wooden crosspiece which held a wax candle-end. The girls lit the candles at dusk and then released the wreaths into the river. The candles told the girls' fortunes – the one whose candle was the last to go out would know the most happiness. But the most fortunate of all were the girls whose wreaths drifted into the whirlpool and slowly spun around and around in the eddy just before the rapids. The air here was still and the flame would burn with unusual intensity such that you could even hear the wick crackle from the banks.

Everyone – children and grown-ups – loved these wreaths on Ivan Kupala Day. Nechipor alone grunted dismissively and liked to say: 'Bunch of nonsense! Those wreaths are pointless!'

Hannah, a distant cousin, came with the girls. She was sixteen. She braided orange and black ribbons in her thick reddish plaits. Around her neck hung a necklace of dull coral. Hannah had sparkling, greenish eyes. Every time Hannah smiled, she lowered her eyes and then raised them slowly as if they were too heavy to lift. Her cheeks were always burning red. I used to hear Mama and Aunt Dozia speaking of Hannah with pity. I wanted to know why, but they always fell silent as soon as I approached.

One Ivan Kupala Day I went down to the river with Hannah to see the girls. On the way she asked: 'Kostik, what are you going to be when you grow up?'

'A sailor,' I answered.

'Oh no, don't do that!' said Hannah. 'Sailors drown out at sea. Someone will then cry their eyes out over you.'

I didn't pay any attention to what Hannah said. I held her hot, suntanned hand in mine and told her about my first trip to the sea.

Early that spring my father had taken me with him to Novorossiisk on a three-day business trip. The sea appeared to be far off, like a blue wall. For a long time I couldn't tell what it was. Then I caught sight of the green bay and the lighthouse and heard the sound of the breakers, and the sea filled me like the memory of a confused but magnificent dream. Two black battleships with yellow funnels sat anchored in the harbour: the *Twelve Apostles* and the *Three Bishops*. My father and I visited the ships. I was amazed by the sunburned officers, with their white uniforms and gold-hilted daggers, and by the oily warmth of the engine room. But I was most amazed by my father. I had never seen him like this before. He laughed, he joked and he carried on lively conversations with the officers. We even visited one of the ship's engineers in his cabin. The two men drank cognac together and smoked pink Turkish cigarettes with gold Arabic lettering on them.

Hannah listened with her head lowered. For some reason I felt bad for her, and I said that when I became a sailor, I would immediately take her with me aboard my ship.

'As what?' Hannah asked. 'The ship's cook or the laundress?'

'No!' I answered, fired by my schoolboy enthusiasm. 'You'll be my wife.'

Hannah stopped and looked me square in the eyes. 'Promise!' she whispered. 'Swear on it in your mother's name!'

'I swear!' I answered, not even thinking what I was saying.

Hannah smiled, her eyes turned as green as seawater, and she gave me a big kiss on the forehead. Her lips were hot. Neither of us said a word the rest of the way to the river.

Hannah's candle was the first to go out. A massive dark storm cloud had appeared over Countess Branitskaya's forest, but, distracted by the wreaths, we did not notice it until the wind struck, thrashing the reeds and bending them to the ground, and the first flash of lightning lit the sky in a blinding explosion of thunder. The girls ran screaming into the woods. Hannah tore the shawl from her shoulders,

wrapped it around me, grabbed my hand, and off we ran. She dragged me behind her, but the downpour was catching up with us and I knew there was no way we'd ever make it home in time.

The downpour hit us near Grandfather's hut. We were soaked through by the time we got there. Grandfather wasn't there. We sat in the hut, clinging to each other. Hannah dried my hands. She smelled of damp calico. She kept asking in a frightened voice: 'Are you cold? Oh, what will I do if you get sick?'

I was shivering. I truly was cold. The look in Hannah's eyes went from fear, to despair, to love. She clutched her throat and began coughing. I saw a vein on her neck bulge beneath her smooth, clear skin. I flung my arms around Hannah and buried my head in her wet shoulder. All of a sudden, I wished that my mother were as young and kind as Hannah.

'What's wrong?' she asked, confused and still coughing as she stroked my head. 'What is it? Don't be frightened . . . The thunder can't hurt us. I'm right here. Don't be frightened.'

Then she gently pushed me away and pressed her mouth to her sleeve, which was embroidered with red oak leaves. When she took her mouth away, I saw a small patch of blood, similar in shape to those leaves, splattered on her sleeve.

'I don't need your oath!' she whispered, looking up at me with a guilty smile. 'I was only kidding.'

The thunder had moved off. The downpour had passed. There was nothing now but the sound of rain dripping from the trees. That night, I caught a fever. The next day young Dr Napelbaum rode out on his bicycle from Belaya Tserkov. He examined me and said I had pleurisy. Napelbaum left us to see Hannah in Pilipchi. When he returned, I overheard him talking in a low voice to my mother in the next room: 'Maria Grigorievna, the girl has galloping consumption. She'll be dead by spring.'

I burst into tears and shouted for Mama. I threw my arms around her, and at that moment I noticed she had the same sweet vein as Hannah. Then I cried even harder and for a long time couldn't stop. Mama stroked my head and said: 'What is it? I'm right here. Don't be frightened.'

I got better, but Hannah died that winter, in February.

Mama and I went to visit her grave the following summer. I placed a bunch of daisies tied with a black ribbon on the small grassy mound. Hannah used to tuck daisies into her plaits. For some reason I felt uncomfortable standing there next to Mama with her red parasol. I should have come alone.

5

A Trip to Chenstokhov

My other grandmother, Vikentia Ivanovna, a tall, old Polish woman, lived in Cherkassy on the river Dnieper. She had many daughters, my aunts. One of these aunts, Yevfrosinia Grigorievna, was the headmistress of a girls' school in Cherkassy. My grandmother lived with this aunt in a large wooden house. Vikentia Ivanovna always went around in mourning and a headdress. She first began to wear mourning clothes after the suppression of the Polish Rebellion of 1863 and from that day on never took them off. We were convinced that during the rebellion Grandmother's fiancé had been killed. He must have been a proud Polish revolutionary, not at all like Grandmother's morose husband, our grandfather, a retired notary public in Cherkassy.

I remember my grandfather poorly. He lived on a small mezzanine and rarely came downstairs. Grandmother sent him off to live there away from all the others given his intolerable smoking habit. Once in a while we'd go and visit him in his room, smelly and dense with smoke. On the table were great piles of tobacco that had spilled out of various pouches. Our grandfather, seated in his chair, would roll cigarette after cigarette with his shaking, gnarled hands. He didn't talk to us but would ruffle the hair on the back of our heads and give us the shiny purple paper off his tobacco pouches.

We often came to visit Vikentia Ivanovna from Kiev. She had one strict habit. Every spring during Lent she undertook a pilgrimage to Catholic holy sites either in Warsaw, Vilnius or Chenstokhov. Sometimes she took it into her head to visit Orthodox shrines and would go to the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergius or to Pochaev. Her sons and daughters all laughed at her and said that if she kept this up, Vikentia Ivanovna would start paying visits to Jewish *tsaddiks* and end her days with a pilgrimage to Mohammed's tomb in Mecca.

The biggest argument my father ever had with my grandmother was when she used the occasion of his travelling to Vienna for a convention of statisticians to take me with her on one of these religious journeys. I was happy to go and did not understand my father's indignation. I was eight at the time. I remember the bright spring air in Vilnius and the chapel at the 'Gate of Dawn' where grandmother went to Mass. The whole town glistened with the pale green and goldish brilliance of the new leaves. At noon a cannon from the Napoleonic era fired a salute from atop Castle Hill.

Grandmother was an extremely well-read woman, and she was forever explaining things to me. She had a remarkable way of combining her religiosity with progressive ideas. She was infatuated with Herzen and at the same time with Henryk Sienkiewicz.[1] In her bedroom portraits of Pushkin and Mickiewicz hung side-by-side with an icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov. During the pogroms of the revolution of 1905, she hid revolutionary students and Jews in her home.

From Vilnius we left for Warsaw. I only recall the Copernicus monument and the cafés where grandmother treated me to 'upside-down-coffee' – more milk than coffee. She also treated me to meringues, which melted in my mouth with creamy cool sweetness. We were served by fidgety waitresses in pleated aprons. From Warsaw we travelled on to Chenstokhov and the famous Catholic monastery of Jasna Góra with its 'miracle-working' Black Madonna icon. This was my first encounter with religious fanaticism. It shocked and frightened me. Ever since I have been filled with fear and revulsion for fanaticism. For a long time, I could not lose the fear I felt that day.

Our train arrived in Chenstokhov early in the morning. It was far from the station to the monastery, which stood on a large green hill. The pilgrims – Polish peasants, men and women – exited the train, along with some city dwellers, all in sooty bowler hats. A portly old priest and some young deacons in lacy garments were waiting for the pilgrims at the station. The procession of pilgrims gathered on the dusty road in front of the station. The priest blessed them and muttered a prayer. The crowd dropped to its knees and began to crawl towards the monastery, chanting psalms as they went.

The throng crawled all the way to the cathedral. Taking the lead was a grey-haired woman with a white, ecstatic face. In her hand she held a black wooden crucifix. Ahead of them all the priest walked slowly and indifferently. It was hot and dusty, sweat was running down their faces. They panted and wheezed and shot reproachful glances at the pilgrims who were falling behind. I grabbed my grandmother by the hand.

‘Why are they doing this?’ I whispered.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ Grandmother answered in Polish. ‘They’re penitents seeking forgiveness for their sins from Our Lord God.’

‘Let’s leave,’ I said to my grandmother, but she pretended not to hear me.

The monastery at Chenstokhov was a medieval castle. Rusty Swedish cannonballs were embedded in its walls, and mucky green water filled the moats. Large, thick trees rustled on the ramparts. The drawbridges had been lowered on their metal chains. We drove across one of them in a droshky into a tangle of courtyards, back streets and alleyways. A lay brother, a cord around his waist, led us to the monastery hotel. We were shown to a cold room with a vaulted ceiling. The inevitable crucifix hung on the wall. Someone had affixed a garland of paper flowers to the nails on Christ’s brass feet. The monk asked my grandmother whether she didn’t happen to be suffering from any illnesses requiring a cure. Grandmother had always been quite anxious about her health, and she immediately complained to him of heart pains. From the pocket of his brown habit the monk took out a handful of small silver hearts, arms, heads and even tiny babies and poured them in a heap on the table.

‘We have hearts’, he said, ‘for five, ten and twenty roubles. They have already been blessed. All you have to do is say a prayer and hang them on the icon of Our Lady.’

Grandmother bought a small plump heart for ten roubles. She told me that we were going to go to Solemn Mass that night at the monastery church, treated me to tea and stale buns from Warsaw, and then lay down to rest. She quickly fell asleep. I looked out of the small window. A monk in a magnificent but faded habit walked past. Then two Polish peasants sat down in the shadow of the wall, took some plain bread and garlic out of their bundles, and began to eat. They had blue eyes and big, strong teeth.

I got bored, so I quietly went out into the street. My grand mother had instructed me not to speak Russian inside the monastery. This scared me since I only knew a few words of Polish. I got lost and ended up in a narrow passage between two walls. The ground was covered with cracked tiles, out of which grew a single plantain. There were cast-iron lanterns along the walls that had not been lit in a long time – I spied a bird’s nest in one of them. A narrow gate in one of the walls stood half open. I looked inside. An apple orchard, bathed in pools of sunlight, stretched out across the slope of a hill. I hesitated and then went inside. The orchard was shedding its blossoms. Yellowed petals were falling. A faint but melodic ringing came from the church belfry.

A young Polish peasant sat nursing her infant under an old apple tree. The baby wrinkled his face and wheezed. Next to the woman stood a pale, puffy peasant youth in a new felt hat. A blue satin ribbon had been sewn to the hat and a peacock feather stuck into it. The young lad stared down at his feet with big round eyes and did not move. A short, bald-headed monk with gardening shears in his hand sat down on a tree stump across from the woman. He fixed his eyes on me and said, ‘Praised be Our Lord Jesus Christ!’

‘For ever and ever!’ I replied, just as my grandmother had taught me. My heart stopped from fright.

The monk turned around and began listening to the woman. Strands of her blond hair kept falling in her face, and she was brushing them back gently and complaining: ‘When our son was four months old, Michas˙ shot a stork and brought it into our little house. I cried and said: “What’ve you done, you fool? Don’t you know that for every stork that’s killed, God takes a baby? Why’d you shoot it, Michaś?”’

The youth in the felt hat went on staring at the ground.

‘And since that day,’ she continued, ‘our dear son has gone blue in the face and has trouble breathing. Will Our Lady help him?’

The monk looked away awkwardly and said nothing.

‘Oh, what misery!’ said the woman and began clawing at her throat, ‘Oh, what misery!’ she wailed, pressing the baby to her breast.

The baby wheezed and its eyes bulged. I remembered the toy silver babies that the lay brother had shown Grandmother back at the hotel. I felt sorry for the woman. I wanted to tell her to buy one of those babies for twenty roubles and hang it on the icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov, but I didn’t know enough Polish to give her this complicated piece of advice. What’s more, I was afraid of the monk, and so I left the orchard. When I got back, Grandmother was still sleeping. I lay down on the hard bed without taking off my clothes and fell fast asleep. Grandmother woke me in the middle of the night. I washed with cold water in a large faience hand-basin. The shock of the water made me shiver. Outside our windows hand-held lanterns floated by, feet shuffled and the bells called.

‘The cardinal is holding Mass tonight,’ Grandmother said. ‘He’s the papal nuncio.’

It was difficult to find our way in the dark, but eventually we reached the church. ‘Hold onto me,’ said Grandmother in the unlit vestibule. We groped our way into the church. I couldn’t see a thing. There wasn’t a single candle, not the faintest glint of light amid the close gloom entombed within the high

church walls. In this utter darkness I could hear the breathing of hundreds of people; there was the slightly sweet smell of flowers. I felt the worn iron floor underfoot, took a step, and immediately bumped into something.

'Be still!' Grandmother whispered. 'There are people lying on the floor. You'll step on them.' She began to say a prayer, and I stood waiting, holding onto her elbow. I was terrified. The people on the floor lay with their arms stretched out in the shape of the cross and were breathing softly. The air was filled with a doleful rustling.

Suddenly, the organ thundered to life, piercing the heavy darkness and shaking the walls. At that very moment hundreds of candles burst into flame. I screamed, blinded and frightened. The large gold curtain covering the icon of Our Lady of Chenstokhov slowly began to part. Six old priests in lacy vestments knelt before the icon with their backs to the crowd, their arms raised up to the heavens. Only the bony cardinal, in his purple cassock with its wide violet sash drawn up about his thin waist, was standing upright, also with his back to the praying crowd, as if listening to the dying storm of the organ and the sobs of the throng. I have never since witnessed such a theatrical or incomprehensible spectacle.

After the service Grandmother and I left and entered a long vaulted passageway. It began to grow light. People knelt in prayer along the walls. Grandmother also knelt and made me kneel too. I was afraid to ask her what these wild-eyed people were waiting for. Then the cardinal appeared at the end of the corridor. He walked swiftly with light steps in our direction. His cassock billowed as he went, brushing the faces of those kneeling in prayer. They grabbed at the edges of his cassock, kissing it with passion and humility.

'Kiss his cassock,' my grandmother hurriedly whispered. But I refused. I blanched and begrudgingly stared the cardinal in the face. There must have been tears in my eyes, for he stopped, touched me briefly on the head with a small, dry hand, and said in Polish: 'A child's tears are the best prayer to the Lord.'

I looked at him. Brown skin was stretched tightly over his pointy face, which appeared to be lit by a dim glow. His black eyes narrowed and focused on me expectantly. I remained stubbornly silent. The cardinal turned round sharply and swept on as lightly as before, stirring the air as he went. Grandmother grabbed me by the arm with such force I nearly cried in pain and led me out of the corridor.

'Just like your father!' she said once we had reached the courtyard. 'Just like your father! Oh, dear Mother of God! Whatever is to become of you?'

[1] Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), Polish novelist and journalist, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1905).

6

Pink Oleanders

My grandmother always kept oleanders in green tubs on the verandah of her home in Cherkassy. They had pink petals. I liked their greyish leaves and pale flowers very much. For some reason I associated them with the sea – a distant, warm sea bathing the shores of a land that blossomed with oleanders. Grandmother had a way with flowers. Her bedroom in the winter months was always overflowing with fuchsias. In the summer the garden exploded with flowers, taking on the appearance of a giant bouquet, and burdock crowded the fences. The scent of all those flowers made its way inside to Grandfather's room on the mezzanine and drove out the tobacco fug. Grandfather would angrily slam the windows shut. He liked to say that the flowers aggravated his chronic asthma.

At the time I imagined the flowers to be living beings. Mignonette was a poor girl in a darned, grey dress, but her remarkable scent gave away her fairytale lineage. The yellow tea-roses were young beauties who had lost their rosy cheeks from drinking too much tea. The bed with pansies looked like a masked ball. These were not flowers, but happy and playful Gypsies in black velvet masks, florid dancers – now blue, now purple, now yellow. I didn't like the daisies. With their faded pink dresses, they reminded me of the little daughters of the schoolmaster Zimmer, my grandmother's neighbour. The girls were tow-headed and had no eyebrows. Every time you met them, they would curtsy, their fingers daintily touching the edge of their skirts. The most interesting flower was, of course, the purslane – a creeper covered with the purest colours. Instead of leaves the purslane had soft, juicy needles. If you gave them a slight squeeze, they'd spray green juice in your face.

Grandmother's garden and all the flowers in it acted on my imagination with uncommon force. My passion for travel must have been born in that garden as well. In my childhood I used to imagine a faraway country that I was certain to visit. It was a hilly plain covered as far as the horizon with grass and flowers and hidden in among them were villages and towns. When express trains crossed the plain, thick pollen would cover the sides of the carriages. I would tell this to my brothers, sister and Mama, but no one cared to understand me. Rather, when he first heard this, my elder brother called me a 'dreamer', a contemptuous nickname that stuck.

Perhaps the only person who understood me was my Aunt Nadya, the youngest of my grandmother's daughters. She was twenty-three at the time and studying singing at the Moscow Conservatory. She had a beautiful contralto voice. She would come to Grandmother's in Cherkassy for Easter and the summer. The quiet, spacious house became noisy and crowded as soon as she arrived. Slender and graceful, with tousled fair hair and fresh lips parted ever so slightly, she played with us and rushed headlong up and down the polished floors, laughing as she went. Flecks of gold sparkled in her grey eyes. These eyes responded to everything with a laugh: to any joke, joyful word, even to Anton the tomcat, who looked upon our games disapprovingly with a most critical expression.

'It's all fun and games for Aunt Nadya!' Mama liked to say, with mild criticism. Her happy-go-lucky nature was proverbial in our family, and she was always losing things – her gloves, her powder, her money – but she never let anything upset her. We opened up the piano the day she arrived, and it remained open until Aunt Nadya left for her cheerful, hospitable Moscow. Piles of sheet music littered the chairs. The candles smoked. The piano rumbled, and sometimes at night I awoke to the sound of her deep yet delicate voice singing a barcarolle: 'Sail, my gondola, lit by the moon. Ring out, barcarolle, over the slumberous waves.'

And in the morning, I was awakened by an ingratiating voice, almost a whisper, by my ear, and Aunt Nadya's hair tickling my cheeks as she sang: 'It's time to get up, it's no time to slumber, your eyes closed, having abandoned yourself to your reveries. The robins have been calling for some time, and for you the roses have opened up!'

I opened my eyes, she kissed me, and then suddenly disappeared, yet a moment later I could hear how she and her brother, Uncle Kolya, a cadet, were twirling through the hall in a rushing waltz. He too sometimes came to visit my grandmother from St Petersburg for Easter. Then I would hop out of bed, sensing that the day was going to be wild, cheerful and full of surprises. When Aunt Nadya sang, even Grandfather up on the mezzanine opened his door to the stairs and would later say to my grandmother:

‘Where on earth did Nadya get her Gypsy blood?’

My grandmother would assure him that Nadya’s blood wasn’t Gypsy, but Polish. Citing examples from literature and the early history of Poland, she showed him that Polish women were often uncontrollably cheerful, whimsical and carefree.

‘Exactly!’ my grandfather answered caustically and then slammed the door shut. ‘Exactly!’ he repeated loudly behind the closed door, sitting down to roll a cigarette.

I recall one year when Easter came late and the gardens in Cherkassy were already in bloom. We arrived by steamboat from Kiev, followed by Aunt Nadya from Moscow. I loved Easter but not the days leading up to it because I was forced to grind almonds and beat egg whites with a spoon. I found this exhausting and would quietly cry to myself. Also, Grandmother’s house was thrown into disorder before Easter. Women with their skirts tucked up were busy washing the ficus plants, rhododendrons, the windows and floors, they beat the rugs and the furniture, they polished all the brass handles and fittings on the doors and windows. And they forever chased us from one room to another.

After the cleaning came the solemn rite – Grandmother made the dough for the Easter cakes or, as our family called them, ‘satin cakes’. A quilt was laid over the tub filled with bubbling yellow dough, and until the dough had risen, no one was allowed to run around, slam the doors or even speak in a raised voice. A cab driving by the house filled my grandmother with horror: the slightest shaking could cause the dough to ‘sink’, and then goodbye to the tall, spongy cakes smelling of saffron and covered with sugary icing.

Along with the cakes, my grandmother also baked a number of different biscuits with raisins and almonds that we called ‘mazurkas’. When the baking tins with the hot mazurkas came out of the oven, such delicious smells wafted through the house that even Grandfather in his mezzanine would get all worked up. He would open the door and peer down into the drawing room at the long marble table already covered with heavy tablecloths. With Holy Sunday, a cool cleanliness and calm finally reigned in the house. In the morning we were given a cup of weak tea with sugar and rusks, and we did not eat another thing until after matins the following day. We liked this short-lived hunger. The day seemed very long, we felt a faint ringing in our ears, and Grandmother’s insistence that we stop talking so much put us in a solemn mood. At midnight we left for matins. They dressed me in long sailor’s trousers and a jacket with brass buttons and brushed my hair so hard it hurt. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw a terribly excited and flushed little boy and was very pleased.

Aunt Yevfrosinia Grigorievna came out of her rooms. She was the only one who did not take part in the Easter preparations. She was always ill, spoke very little, and did nothing but gently smile at our cheerful banter. She wore a drab blue dress with a gold watch chain around her neck and a pretty bow on her shoulder. Mama explained to me that the bow was called a ‘cipher’ and had been awarded to Aunt Yevfrosinia Grigorievna for graduating with high honours from the institute she had once attended.

Mama wore her special grey dress, and Father his black suit and white waistcoat. Then Grandmother would make her grand appearance – beautiful and all in black silk with an artificial heliotrope pinned to her corsage. Her smooth dress rustled as she walked along so lightly – Grandmother became younger on those nights. She lit the lamps before the icons and then pulled on her black lace gloves and Father held out her mantle with its black ribbon ties.

‘You’re not coming to Mass, I take it?’ Grandmother asked him with chilly politeness.

‘No, Vikentia Ivanovna,’ Father replied with a smile. ‘I think I’ll lie down for a while. They’ll wake me when you’re back from church.’

‘Oh,’ said my grandmother and shook her shoulders, adjusting her mantle. ‘My only hope is that God has had enough of your jokes and has given up on you as a lost cause.’

‘I’m also counting on that very much,’ Father answered politely.

Grandmother went upstairs for a moment to say goodbye to Grandfather. When she came back down, Aunt Nadya, who was always late, appeared in the hall. She didn’t so much walk as fly, just like a petite, shimmering bird, in her white silk dress with a train and puffed sleeves. She was breathing heavily, and the yellow rose on her breast fluttered. It seemed as if all the light and joy of the world were shining in her eyes. Grandmother stopped on the stairs to put her handkerchief to her eyes. She could not hold back the tears at the sight of her youngest daughter’s beauty. It was clear she thought about Aunt Nadya’s fate, about what would become of her in this harsh world, and these thoughts could not keep my grandmother from crying. When we returned from church this time, Father was not asleep. He had opened the windows of the drawing room that looked out onto the garden. It was very warm.

We sat down at the table to break the fast. The night hovered all around us. The stars shone straight into our eyes. From the garden came the twittering of a bird. We spoke little and everyone listened to the rising and falling sound of the bells in the darkness. Aunt Nadya sat pale and tired. I had seen that my

father had handed her a blue telegram in the entrance hall while helping her off with her cloak. She had blushed and crushed the telegram in her hand. After we had eaten, I was sent straight to bed. I awoke late to the clinking of cups in the dining room where the adults were already drinking coffee. At dinner Aunt Nadya said that she had received a telegram from her friend Liza Yavorskaya in the neighbouring town of Smela. Liza had invited Aunt Nadya to come and spend the day with her at her home near Smela.

'I want to go tomorrow,' said Aunt Nadya, looking at Grandmother, and then added: 'And take Kostik with me.' I blushed with joy.

'All right,' Grandmother replied, 'go, but take care you don't both catch cold.'

'They're sending horses for us,' said Aunt Nadya.

It was an hour's ride on the train from Cherkassy to Smela. Liza Yavorskaya, a plump and cheerful young lady, met us at the station in Smela. In a carriage and pair we drove through the clean and pretty little town. The river Tyasmin had overflowed its banks at the foot of some steep green hills, its slow current swirling with quiet eddies that appeared silver in the light. It was hot. Dragonflies flew over the river. We drove through a lonely park outside town and Liza Yavorskaya said that Pushkin had loved to go for walks here. I couldn't believe that Pushkin had visited these places and that I was now where he had been. At that time Pushkin seemed to me to be a purely legendary being. There was no way his spectacular life could have had any connection to this Ukrainian backwater.

'The Raevskys' old estate, Kamenka, is nearby,' said Liza Yavorskaya. 'He stayed with them for a long time and wrote a marvellous poem there.'

'Which one?' asked Aunt Nadya.

'Play, know no sorrow, Adele, / For you've been crowned by the Charites and Lel, / 'Twas they who rocked your cradle so well . . .'

I did not understand what 'the Charites' or 'Lel' meant,[1] but the music and power of these verses, the expansive park, the ancient lime trees, and the sky with its drifting clouds – all combined to put me in a magical mood. The whole day remained in my memory as a quiet and lonely celebration of spring. Liza Yavorskaya got the carriage to stop in a broad allée. We got out and went up to a house on a path lined on either side with dog-rose. Suddenly, at a turn in the path, out popped a well-tanned, bearded man without a hat. He had a double-barrelled shotgun over his shoulder, and in his hand he carried two dead ducks. His jacket was undone, exposing his strong, brown neck. Aunt Nadya stopped, and I saw that she had gone very pale.

The tanned man broke off a large branch of dog-rose covered in small thorns, bloodying his hands, and handed it to Aunt Nadya. She carefully took the spiky rose and extended her hand to the old man, and he kissed it.

'Your hair reeks of gunpowder,' said Aunt Nadya. 'And your hands are all cut up. You must have the thorns removed.'

'It's nothing!' he said and smiled. He had nice, straight teeth. Now, close up, I noticed he was not an old man at all. We made our way to the house. The bearded man talked most strangely, about everything all at once – about how he had arrived from Moscow two days ago, how wonderful this place was, how the day after tomorrow he had to take his paintings to an exhibition in Venice, how he'd been bewitched by a Gypsy – a model of the artist Vrubel[2] – and how he was a lost soul who could be saved only by the voice of Aunt Nadya. Aunt Nadya was smiling. I watched him. I liked him very much. I guessed he was an artist. He really did smell of gunpowder. His hands were covered in pine sap. Now and then bright blood dripped from the ducks' black bills onto the path. The artist had cobwebs stuck in his thick hair, along with some pine needles and even a dry twig. Aunt Nadya took him by the arm, made him stop and pulled out the twig.

'You're hopeless!' she said. 'Just a little boy,' she added, smiling sadly.

'Try to understand,' he mumbled in a begging voice, 'it was wonderful! I forced my way through a young pine forest, and yes, I got all torn up, but what smells, what dry white pinks, what red pine needles, and what a spider's web! Such delights!'

'And that's why I love you,' Aunt Nadya said softly.

Suddenly, the artist took the gun from his shoulder and fired both barrels into the air. Bluish smoke swirled from the end of the gun. Dogs began barking and running towards us. A frightened hen could be heard squawking.

'A salute to life!' said the artist. 'It's a hell of a marvellous thing to be alive!'

We made our way to the house with the excited dogs barking around us. The house was white with columns and striped curtains covering the windows. A little old lady – Liza Yavorskaya's mother – came out to greet us in a pale mauve dress and holding a lorgnette, her hair a pile of grey curls. She screwed

up her eyes and, clasping her hands, extolled Aunt Nadya's beauty at length. A breeze blew through the cool rooms, tugging at the curtains and sweeping copies of *The Russian Word* and *Kievan Thought* off the table. The dogs wandered about, sniffing here and there. All of a sudden, they heard some suspicious noises coming from the park and raced outside, yelping loudly and falling all over each other as they went.

Patches of sunlight, chased from room to room by the breeze, picked out things along the way – vases, the brass castors on the piano legs, gilt picture frames, the straw hat Aunt Nadya had tossed onto the windowsill. We drank strong coffee in the dining room. The artist told me about how he had caught a fish in the centre of Paris on the embankment across from Notre-Dame. Aunt Nadya watched him, a gentle, amused smile on her face, and Liza's mother kept repeating: 'Oh, Sasha! When will you finally grow up? It's high time already!'

After our coffee the artist took Aunt Nadya and me by the hand and led us to his room. Brushes and squeezed paint tubes lay all about. An air of total disorder reigned in the room. He quickly gathered up some dirty shirts, boots and bits of canvas, shoved them under the sofa, then filled his pipe with oily tobacco from a blue tin, lit it, and ordered Aunt Nadya and me to sit down on the window-sill. We sat down as ordered. The sun was very warm on our backs. The artist went up to a picture on the wall covered by a cloth and removed it. There it is,' he mumbled in an embarrassed voice. 'I've managed to botch every last bit of it.'

It was a portrait of Aunt Nadya. Back then I didn't know a thing about painting. I had overheard my father and Uncle Kolya arguing about Vereshchagin[3] and Vrubel, but I'd never seen a good picture in my life. The ones at my grandmother's house were gloomy landscapes with dull trees and stags beside a stream or still-lifes of dead ducks hanging upside down. When the artist revealed the portrait I couldn't help laughing from sheer delight – the portrait captured the essence of Aunt Nadya's springtime beauty, and also the golden cascade of sunshine that poured down into the old park, the breeze wafting through the rooms and the greenish reflection of the leaves. Aunt Nadya looked at the portrait for a long time, then she playfully ruffled the artist's hair and hastened out of the room without saying a word.

'Well, thank God!' the artist sighed. 'That means I can take the work to the exhibition in Venice.'

That afternoon we went for a boat ride on the Tyasmin. A green crenellated wall, the shadow cast by the trees in the park, lay on the water. In the depths the round leaves of young water lilies could be seen straining to reach the surface. In the evening, before we left, Aunt Nadya sang in the cosy music room, accompanied by the artist, whose fingers, still smeared with pine sap, kept sticking to the piano keys: *First meetings, last meetings, the dear sound of a beloved's voice . . .*

Then we drove back to Smela in a carriage and pair, along with the artist and Liza. The horses' hooves clanged on the hard road. From the river came a damp breeze and the croaking of frogs. High overhead, a single star burned in the sky. At the station Liza took me to the buffet to get ice cream while the artist and Aunt Nadya sat down on a bench in the little garden out front. The buffet didn't have any ice cream, of course, and when we returned, Aunt Nadya and the artist were still sitting on the bench, lost in thought.

Soon after this Aunt Nadya left for Moscow, and I never saw her again. At Shrovetide the following year, she sang in an open troika while riding to Petrovsky Park and caught a chill that soon developed into pneumonia. She died just before Easter. My grandmother, mother and even my father went to her funeral. I missed her terribly, and to this day I cannot forget Aunt Nadya. She has always remained for me the embodiment of feminine youth, warmth and happiness.

[1] 'Lel' refers to mythical Slavic pagan goddesses of love or marriage.

[2] Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), painter and sculptor particularly remembered for his series of 'Demon' paintings.

[3] Vasily Vereshchagin (1842–1904), realist painter well known for his depictions of war.

7

Elderwood Balls

Small, soft white balls rolled around inside a box. I would drop one into a bowl of water. The ball would begin to swell, and then open up and transform itself into either a black elephant with red eyes or an orange dragon or a rose with green leaves. These magical Chinese balls made of elderwood had been a gift from my godfather and uncle, Iosif Grigorievich, or, simply, Uncle Yuzia, who'd brought them from Peking.

'An adventurer, pure and simple!' Father would say of him, although not with disapproval, but in fact a touch of envy. He envied Uncle Yuzia because he had travelled all over Africa, Asia and Europe, and not as some well-behaved tourist, but as a crusader, noisy, rowdy, insolently daring, and with an unquenchable thirst for every improbable kind of affair in any corner of the globe: from Shanghai to Addis Ababa, from Harbin to Mashhad. All these affairs had ended in failure.

'I should stake a claim in the Klondike,' Uncle Yuzia liked to say. 'I'd show those Americans a thing or two.'

Just what it was exactly he was going to show those inveterate gold prospectors in the Klondike remained unclear. But it was perfectly obvious that he would have shown them something so stupendous that his fame would resound all across the Yukon and Alaska. Perhaps he had been born to be a famous explorer or discoverer like Nikolai Przhevalsky[1] or Livingstone. But life in Russia back then in those days – what my father called 'untimely' – had ruined Uncle Yuzia. His noble passion for travel became in the end a haphazard and fruitless wandering. All the same, I am indebted to Uncle Yuzia, for his stories made the world a desperately interesting subject for me, and I have kept this feeling my whole life. Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna regarded Uncle Yuzia as a form of 'divine retribution' and the black sheep of the family. When she was angry at me for some prank or being naughty, she'd say: 'Mind yourself or you'll turn out to be a second Uncle Yuzia!'

My poor grandmother! She had no idea that my uncle's life seemed to me utterly splendid. My sole dream was to become 'a second Uncle Yuzia'. Uncle Yuzia always turned up unexpectedly at our home in Kiev or at our grandmother's in Cherkassy only to disappear just as unexpectedly, and then reappear in a year or eighteen months with his deafening ring at our door and fill the flat with his hoarse voice, his coughing, swearing and infectious laughter. And every time right behind Uncle Yuzia would be the cab driver dragging heavy trunks across the floor filled with all sorts of treasures.

Uncle Yuzia was a tall, bearded man with a broken nose, hands of steel – he could bend silver roubles – and suspiciously calm eyes, in whose depths always lurked a glint of cunning. As my father would say, 'He has no fear of God, Satan or death,' although he'd go all to pieces at the sight of a woman's tears or when confronted by a capricious child. The first time I ever saw him was after the Boer War. Uncle Yuzia had joined the Boers as a volunteer. This heroic and unselfish act had greatly raised his stock among all the relatives.

All of us children were shocked by this war. We felt sorry for the Boers fighting for their independence and hated the English. We knew the details of every battle fought on the other side of the earth – the siege of Ladysmith, the clash at Bloemfontein, the assault on Diamond Hill. Our heroes were the Boer generals De Wet, Joubert and Botha. We despised the haughty Lord Kitchener and laughed at the English soldiers in their red coats. We were intoxicated by a book called *Pieter Maritz, a Young Boer from the Transvaal*. But it wasn't just us – the entire civilised world followed with a sinking heart the tragedy being played out on the plains between the Vaal and the Orange River, appalled at the unequal fight of a small nation against a great world power. Even the organ grinder in Kiev, who until then had only played 'The Parting', began to play a new song: 'Transvaal, Transvaal, you burn in flames'. For this we gave him the five-kopeck pieces we'd saved up for ice cream.

For young boys like me the Boer War ruined the exotic dreams of childhood. Africa, it turned out, was not at all as we had imagined it to be based on the novels published in *Around the World* or from engineer Gorodetsky's house on Bankovaya Street in Kiev. The walls of his grey house, which looked like a castle, were decorated with sculptures of rhinoceroses, giraffes, lions, crocodiles, antelopes and other African beasts. Instead of drainpipes, elephant trunks made of concrete hung down over the pavement.

Water dripped from the jaws of rhinoceroses. Grey stone boa constrictors reared their heads from the façade's dark recesses.

The owner of the house, engineer Gorodetsky, was a fanatical hunter. He had even travelled to Africa to hunt. It was in memory of these hunting expeditions that he decorated his house with these stone figures of wild beasts. Grown-ups said Gorodetsky was a bit mad, but we little boys loved his strange house, and it had done much to shape our fantasies about Africa. But now, even though we were still little, we understood that a huge struggle for human rights was being waged on the so-called Dark Continent, where until then we had thought only of the trumpeting of wise elephants, the miasmas of the tropical jungles, and the hippopotamuses quietly snorting in the slimy ooze of great uncharted rivers. Until then, Africa existed as the land of explorers, of various Stanleys and Livingstones.

I, just like the other boys, was sorry to lose that Africa where we had wandered in our dreams, to say goodbye to lion hunts, dawns over the sands of the Sahara, rafts on the Niger, whistling arrows, the furious shrieks of monkeys, the dark gloom of impenetrable forests. Danger awaited us there at every turn. In our imagination we had already died many times of fever or wounds behind the log walls of a fort listening to the whizz of a lone bullet, breathing the poisonous vapours of the swamps, gazing with inflamed eyes into the black velvety sky at the dying glimmer of the Southern Cross. How often had I died regretting my short, young life and my never having crossed mysterious Africa from Algiers to the Cape of Good Hope, from the Congo to Zanzibar!

Nevertheless, it was impossible to erase this image of Africa from my mind completely. It had a life of its own. Hence, the shock, the wordless amazement I felt at the appearance in our prosaic Kiev flat of a bearded man, burnt by the African sun, sporting a wide-brimmed Boer hat and an open-necked shirt with a cartridge clip on his belt – Uncle Yuzia. I followed his every step, I gazed into his eyes. I couldn't believe that these eyes before me had seen the Orange River, Zulu kraals, British cavalrymen and storms on the Pacific. This happened just as the president of the Transvaal, the corpulent old Kruger,[2] had come to Russia to request help for the Boers. Uncle Yuzia had travelled with him. He stayed in Kiev just one day and then departed for St Petersburg right behind Kruger. Uncle Yuzia was convinced Russia would help the Boers. But from Petersburg he wrote to Father: 'Overriding considerations of State have forced the Russian Government to make an ignominious decision: we will not be helping the Boers. This means everything is lost, and I'm heading back now once more to the Far East.'

•

My grandfather – on my mother's side – had not been a wealthy man. He would not have been able to educate his many children – five daughters and three sons – had he not sent all his sons to the Kiev Cadet Academy, where education was free. Uncle Yuzia had studied there together with his brothers. All went well for four years, but then in his fifth year Uncle Yuzia was transferred from Kiev to the penal 'convict' academy in the town of Volsk on the Volga. Cadets were sent to Volsk only for 'serious crimes'. Uncle Yuzia had committed just such a crime.

The kitchen of the Kiev Cadet Academy was in the cellar. Before one of the holidays a large number of buns had been baked and left to cool on a long kitchen table. Uncle Yuzia got hold of a pole, fixed a nail to it, and used it to fish out through an open window a few dozen brown buns, after which he laid on a magnificent feast for his classmates. Uncle Yuzia spent only two years in Volsk. In his third year he was expelled from the Cadet Academy and demoted to the rank of private for striking an officer – the officer had stopped him in the street and reprimanded him harshly for some trifling fault in his uniform.

Uncle Yuzia was given a soldier's greatcoat and a rifle and sent off from Volsk on foot to join an artillery unit in the town of Kutno near Warsaw. He crossed the country from east to west in winter, reporting to the various garrison commanders along the way, begging for his food in the villages, sleeping where he could at night. He left Volsk a hot-headed boy and arrived in Kutno an embittered soldier. In Kutno he advanced to ensign, the lowest of the officers' ranks.

Uncle Yuzia was plagued by the worst possible luck in his military career. He was transferred from the artillery to the infantry. His regiment was sent to Moscow to do guard duty during the coronation of Nicholas II. Uncle Yuzia's company was ordered to guard the river embankment alongside the Kremlin. Early on the morning of the coronation, my uncle saw his soldiers race down to the river's edge where a violent melee had broken out. Gripping his sabre, he ran to join the soldiers. There in the mud on the riverbank he encountered a terrifying creature with a bronze head entangled in tubing. The soldiers had knocked the creature down and piled on top of it, and it was awkwardly trying to kick them off with its enormous lead boots. One of the soldiers wrapped a thick rubber hose around the creature's copper head and it let out a hoarse rattle and soon stopped resisting. My uncle then realised that the creature was in fact a diver, screamed at the soldiers and began to quickly unscrew the copper helmet, but by then the

diver was already dead. Neither my uncle nor the soldiers had been informed that divers would be searching the bottom of the Moscow River that morning for devilish devices.

After this incident Uncle Yuzia was discharged from the army. He left for central Asia, where he served for a while as the chief of camel caravans travelling from Uralsk to Khiva and Bukhara. At the time central Asia had yet to be linked to Russia by the railway, and so all goods had to be unloaded from the trains at Uralsk and transferred onto camels and transported thence by caravan. During one of these caravan trips my uncle made friends with the Grum-Grzhimailo brothers,[3] explorers of central Asia, and hunted tigers with them. He sent Grandmother a gift of one of his tiger skins that had such a ferocious expression on its dead face she immediately hid it in the cellar, after first sprinkling it with mothballs.

Uncle Yuzia loved to tell how he could kill jackals on the spot just by sneezing at them. Out in the desert at night he'd lie down with his head on the knapsack containing his food and pretend to fall asleep. The jackals would creep up with their tails between their legs. Once the most brazen of them began to carefully pull the knapsack with his teeth out from under our uncle's head, he'd let out a deafening sneeze and the cowardly jackal would drop dead of heart failure right there without letting out so much as a yelp. We believed him because we knew how loudly Uncle Yuzia sneezed in the morning as he prepared for the day. Those sneezes caused the glass in the windows to rattle and the terrified cat to race about the room trying to escape. Uncle Yuzia's tales were more interesting to us than the adventures of Baron von Munchhausen. We had to conjure up Munchhausen in our imaginations, whereas Uncle Yuzia was right there – alive, enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke, shaking the sofa with his laughter.

After this, a sketchy period in Uncle Yuzia's life began. He roamed about Europe; he played, so some say, the roulette tables in Monte Carlo; and then he turned up in Abyssinia from where he returned with an enormous gold medal conferred upon him by the Negus Menelik.[4] The medal looked like the sort of badges worn here by janitors.

Uncle Yuzia had trouble finding his place in life until his gaze turned toward the mists of the Far East, to Manchuria and the land of the river Ussuri. It was as if this country existed solely for people like Uncle Yuzia. There one could live freely, expansively, to the full extent of one's unbridled nature and ambition without having to submit to any 'asinine laws'. This was the Russian Alaska – un-tamed, rich and dangerous. No better place on earth for Uncle Yuzia could have been invented. The Amur, the taiga, gold, the Pacific Ocean, Korea, and then beyond – Kamchatka, Japan, Polynesia. A vast, unknown world thundered like the surf on the shores of the Far East, exciting the imagination of such men.

Uncle Yuzia went off to the Far East, but only after having taken for himself a wife, a young religious ascetic, or so Mama insisted since in her opinion only some sort of ascetic could stand being married to such an awful man as my uncle. There he took part in the defence of Harbin during the Boxer Rebellion, in fights with the *honghuzi* and in the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway, interrupting these undertakings only to go to the Transvaal. After the Boer War he returned to the Far East, although not to Manchuria, but to Port Arthur, where he worked as an agent of the Russian Volunteer Fleet. Uncle Yuzia wrote to us that he'd fallen in love with ships and the sea and regretted not having become a sailor in his youth.

About this time his wife died, and Uncle Yuzia was left with two little daughters on his hands. An affectionate though somewhat bungling father, he raised them with the help of his old Chinese servant, whom my uncle called 'Fetch Me-tea'.[5] Uncle Yuzia loved this devoted man nearly as much as his own daughters. He loved the Chinese in general and liked to say that this splendid, kind and wise people had but one shortcoming – a fear of rain.

During the Russo-Japanese War Uncle Yuzia was called up into the army as a former officer. He sent his daughters and 'Fetch Metea' off to live in Harbin. After the war he visited us in Kiev. This was the last time I saw him. By then he was already grey and staid, but those rambunctious and merry sparkles still flickered from time to time in his eyes. He told us all about Peking, about the gardens of the Chinese emperors, about Shanghai and the Yellow River. After such stories China became for me a land of eternal warm and clear nights. Maybe that impression was due to the fact that Uncle Yuzia no longer made things up, no longer rolled his eyes or roared with laughter, but spoke in a tired voice, constantly flicking the ash from his cigarette.

That was in 1905. Uncle Yuzia had little understanding of politics. He considered himself an old soldier, and he was – honourable and loyal to his oath. When my father began one of his critical and dangerous speeches, Uncle Yuzia fell silent, walked out into the garden, sat down on a bench and smoked in solitude. He considered Father 'more leftist than the left'. In the autumn of '05 a battalion of sappers together with a company of bridge engineers mutinied in Kiev. The sappers fought their way through the city, holding off a company of Cossacks sent in to put them down. The workers of the South Russian Machine Works joined the sappers. A crowd of children ran in front of the rebels. The Azov Sapper

Regiment opened fire on the mutineers at the Galitsky Market, killing a great many children and workers. The rebellious sappers couldn't return fire because of a crowd of civilians between them and the Azov men.

Uncle Yuzia became very agitated when he learned of the day's events; pacing back and forth in the garden, he chain-smoked and swore under his breath. 'The Azovs,' he muttered, 'those fools. What a disgrace! And those sappers are no better – not marksmen, but petty thieves!'

And then he vanished without notice, and by evening had still not returned. He didn't come back that night or the next day. In fact, he never returned. Finally, six months later a letter arrived from one of his daughters in Harbin. She informed us that Uncle Yuzia had settled in Japan and asked us to forgive him for his sudden disappearance. Much later we learned that Uncle Yuzia had gone over to the sappers and was so enraged by the sight of the massacred children that together with Lieutenant Zhadanovsky, the leader of the rebellion, he organised a group of sappers and they had unleashed such a fusillade on the government's troops that they had been forced to retreat. After this Uncle Yuzia had no choice but to flee. He left for Japan, where he soon died in the city of Kobe from cardiac asthma and that most horrible of illnesses – homesickness. Towards the end of his life, this enormous and ferocious man would cry at the slightest reminder of Russia. In his last letter he asked, almost as if in jest, to send him in an envelope the most precious gift he could think of – a dried leaf from a Kiev chestnut tree.

[1] Nikolai Przhevalsky (1839–88), famous geographer and explorer of central and eastern Asia.

[2] Paul Kruger (1825–1904), president of the South African Republic 1883– 1900.

[3] Grigory Grum-Grzhimailo (1860–1936), entomologist and lepidopterist, made numerous voyages to collect in central Asia and the Russian Far East; Vladimir (1864–1928), his younger brother, a noted metallurgist.

[4] Menelik II (1884–1913), negus of Shewa 1866–89, emperor of Ethiopia 1889–1913.

[5] Paustovsky's uncle called his servant 'Sam Pyu-chai', which can be translated literally as 'Drink tea myself', an expression of a then rather common – and clearly xenophobic – punning on what were for Russians strange-sounding Chinese names and words.

8

Svyatoslavskaya Street

The visits to Cherkassy and Gorodishche were the holidays of my childhood, while my humdrum, everyday life was centred in Kiev. Here we spent the long winters in our dreary flat on Svyatoslavskaya Street. The street, lined with monotonous blocks of flats of the same yellow Kievan bricks that were used for the pavement, ended in an enormous open area furrowed with gullies. There were several of these empty plots in the city. They were called 'the ravines'.

All day long carts loaded with clay and rock rumbled past our house on Svyatoslavskaya Street on their way to the ravine. They dumped their loads into the ravines to level them out in preparation for building more houses. The dirt was always spilling from these carts and leaving behind a muddy mess, which is why I never did like Svyatoslavskaya Street.

We were strictly forbidden from going into the ravine. It was a terrifying place, a hideout for beggars and thieves. Nevertheless, all of us boys would on occasion form a gang and walk down together. We brought a police whistle with us just in case. To our minds it was as reliable a weapon as a revolver. At first, we just stood on the edge and looked warily down into the ravine. We could make out shards of sparkly broken glass, rusty tin cans, and dogs digging around in the rubbish. They never paid us any attention. Then we became brave enough to begin to descend. Dirty yellow smoke curled up from the hovels and dugouts at the bottom. The hovels were constructed out of any old thing lying about – broken plywood, old tin, battered crates, seats from bentwood chairs, mattresses with their springs sticking out of them. Dirty sacks served as doors. Dishevelled women in rags sat around the fires in the ravine. They called us 'the masters' boys' and begged money for vodka. Only one of them, a grey, shaggy old woman with the face of a lioness, smiled at us, displaying her last remaining tooth.

She was from Italy and was well known in Kiev. She went from door to door playing the accordion for money. For a little extra she would play 'La Marseillaise'. On those occasions, one boy stood lookout by the gate to watch for the police. This beggar woman not only played 'La Marseillaise' on the accordion, she screamed it in her furious, wheezing voice. In her rendition the song sounded like an angry call to arms, a curse uttered by the inhabitants of the Svyatoslavsky ravine.

There were familiar faces among the inhabitants of the hovels. There was the beggar Yasha Paduchy, for example, whose white eyes were always bleary from too much vodka. He liked to sit on the steps of St Vladimir's Cathedral moaning the same few words over and over: 'Good people, take pity on a cripple who needs his tipple!' Back in the ravine Yasha Paduchy was not at all the snivelling, gentle beggar he played at the cathedral. He would drink down a quarter of a litre of vodka in one swallow, beat his chest with all his might, and howl tearfully: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!'

Then there was the old bald man who hawked toothbrushes on Fundukleevskaya Street near Café François, and next to him the organ grinder with his parrot. Alongside the hovels clay ovens belched smoke through broken samovar funnels. I liked the organ grinder's hovel most of all. He was gone all day long, out wandering from street to street, but a barefoot girl sat on the ground nearby peeling potatoes. She had an earthy complexion and pretty, sullen eyes. One of her legs was bound with rags.

This was the organ grinder's daughter. A tumbler so flexible she didn't seem to have any bones, she had earlier gone door to door with her father. A skinny little girl in blue tights, she would lay out a small carpet on the ground and perform acrobatic tricks for money. But then she injured her legs and could no longer 'work'. She liked to read the same book over and over. The cover had been torn off but based on the illustrations I guessed it was *The Three Musketeers*. She used to get angry and shout at us: 'What is it you want with us? Haven't you ever seen how ordinary people live?' But then she got used to us and stopped shouting. Once her short, grey father ran into us in the ravine and said to her: 'Let them see how we suffer down here. Maybe it'll be of use to them one day when they're students.'

Initially, we went down into the ravine in a gang, but then I became accustomed to its inhabitants and started to go by myself. I hid this from Mama for a long time, but the organ grinder's daughter gave me away. I had brought her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to read and then became ill for a long time and never did come back for it. She began to worry and came to our flat to return the book. Mama opened the door,

and that was the end of my secret. I could tell what had happened by Mama's tight lips and icy silence.

That evening my parents sat down in the dining room to discuss my behaviour. I stood listening outside the door. Mama was upset and cross, but my father said that it was nothing to worry about, that it wouldn't ruin me, and that he preferred I was friends with these unfortunate people rather than with the sons of Kiev's merchants and officials. To this Mama replied that at my age I had to be protected from the distressing parts of life.

'Listen,' said Father, 'these people repay decent, honest treatment with a devotion you won't find in our circles. How can this be distressing?'

Mama was silent and then said: 'Yes, maybe you're right . . .'

After I had recovered, she gave me Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* and said: 'Here . . . take this to the organ grinder's daughter. I don't know her name.'

'Liza,' I said shyly.

'Well then, take the book to Liza. As a present.'

From then on no one at home made any fuss about my visits to the Svyatoslavsky ravine. I no longer had to sneak out with a bit of sugar from the sideboard for my new friends or with nuts for Mitka, the half-blind parrot. I simply asked Mama for them. And she never said no. I was grateful to Mama for this, and my spirit was as light as only that of a boy with a clear conscience can be.

Early one autumn morning the organ grinder appeared in our courtyard without his parrot. He slowly turned the crank, his heart not in it, and the organ whistled out a polka: 'Come along, come along, my angel, come along and dance with me.' His eyes searched the balconies and the open windows, waiting for the moment when the coppers, wrapped in paper, would begin flying out into the yard.

I ran out to the organ grinder. He went on turning the crank and said: 'Mitka's sick. Just sits there like a hedgehog. He won't even crack your nuts. It's obvious, he's dying.' The organ grinder took off his dusty black cap and wiped his face with it. 'What a hopeless existence!' he said. 'An organ grinder without his Mitka can't even earn enough for his vodka, let alone his bread. Now who'll help me tell people their fortune?'

For five kopecks the parrot would pick out for the curious little green, blue or red tickets with fortunes printed on them. For some reason these tickets were called 'good fortune'. The tickets were rolled up into little tubes and placed like cigarettes in a cartridge case. Before pulling out a ticket, Mitka stamped up and down for a long time on his perch and screeched unhappily.

The fortunes were written in rather obscure language. 'You were born under the sign of Mercury, and your stone is the emerald, also known as the smaragd, which signifies a dislike for worldly affairs and a final mastery over them only once you have reached those years marked by the white of your hair. Beware of blonds, be they male or female, and do not venture out on the feast of St John the Baptist.'

Sometimes the tickets contained short, sinister phrases: 'Tomorrow at dusk' or 'If you wish to go on living, never turn round.'

A day later Mitka was dead, and I buried him in a shoe box in the ravine. The organ grinder got drunk and disappeared. I told Mama about the parrot's death. My lips quivered, but I managed to keep my composure.

'Get dressed,' Mama said in a stern voice. 'We're going to Burmistrov's.' Burmistrov was a nearly deaf old man whose beard was green with age. He looked like a gnome. In a dark, cramped shop in Bessarabka, Burmistrov traded in the most marvellous things – fishing rods, brightly coloured floats, fish tanks, goldfish, birds, ants' eggs and transfers. Mama bought from Burmistrov an old green parrot with a lead ring on its leg. He lent us a cage. I carried it with the parrot inside out of the shop. Along the way the bird managed to bite my finger down to the bone. We stepped into a chemist's and had it bandaged but I was so excited I hardly felt a thing. I wanted to go straight to the organ grinder and give him the parrot, but Mama said: 'I am going with you. I must see this for myself.'

She went to her room to change. I was ashamed that Mama would change into her finer clothes before going to visit some poor and bedraggled people, but I didn't have the courage to say anything to her. A few minutes later she came out. She was wearing an old dress, darned at the elbows. She had thrown a kerchief over her head. For once she was going out without her elegant kid gloves. As for her shoes, she had chosen the pair with the worn-down heels. I looked at her gratefully, and we set off.

Mama descended steadfastly into the ravine, passing dishevelled women struck dumb with amazement and never once bothering to lift her skirt to avoid the mounds of rubbish and cinders. Upon seeing us with the parrot, Liza blushed, her grey face turning a bright red, and made a hurried curtsy to Mama. The organ grinder was not at home – he was still out drowning his sorrow with his friends in Demievka. Liza took the parrot and, her face reddening ever more and more, kept repeating the same words: 'Oh, but you shouldn't have! You shouldn't have!'

‘Do you think he can be taught to tell people’s fortunes?’ Mama asked.

‘Yes, of course, in two days’ time!’ Liza said, full of joy. ‘Oh, but you shouldn’t have! Good Lord! Why? He must have been expensive!’

After hearing about this back at home, Father grinned and said: ‘Ladies’ philanthropy! It’s their sentimental education!’

‘Oh, Lord!’ exclaimed Mama, annoyed with my father. ‘I truly don’t know why you insist on contradicting yourself. You really are too much. You would have done exactly the same in my place.’

‘No,’ my father replied, ‘I would have done more.’

‘More?’ Mama asked. I could hear a threat in her voice. ‘Oh, really? Well, we shall see!’

‘Yes, we shall see!’

I didn’t realise that my father was doing this deliberately just to upset Mama.

The day after this row Mama sent Liza my sister’s black dress and a pair of her own brown boots. But my father was not to be outdone. He waited for the organ grinder to return to the yard with his new parrot. The organ grinder sported a red scarf around his neck. The vodka had lent his nose the red sheen of victory. In Mama’s honour he played every last tune that his organ knew: a march, ‘Longing for the Motherland’; a waltz, ‘Waves of the Danube’; a polka, ‘The Parting’; and a song, ‘Oh, How the Box Is Full to Bursting’.

Once again, the parrot selected people’s fortunes. Generous hands tossed paper-wrapped coppers from the windows. Some of these the organ grinder caught gracefully in his cap. Then he slung the organ on his back and set off, bent low, as always, by the weight, but this time not out into the street but up the front staircase to our door where he rang the bell.

Having doffed his cap and extending it so low it brushed the floor, he thanked Mama and kissed her hand. Father came out and invited the organ grinder into his study. He leaned his organ gently against the wall in the front hall and then, moving carefully, followed my father. He served the organ grinder a cognac, saying that he understood what a difficult and uncertain life he led, and then offered him a position as watchman on the South-West Railway. He would have his own little house and garden.

‘Don’t judge me too harshly, Georgy Maximovich,’ he replied, blushing, ‘but I’d be bored to death. It seems I’m fated to spend my life a poor organ grinder.’

He left. Mama could not hide her look of victory, although she did manage to keep quiet.

A few days later the police unexpectedly evicted the inhabitants of the Svyatoslavsky ravine. Liza and the organ grinder disappeared. Most likely they moved on to another town. But before all this happened, I did manage to visit the ravine one last time. The organ grinder invited me to ‘spend the evening’ at his place. On an overturned crate he had laid out a plate with baked tomatoes and black bread, a bottle of cherry brandy and some old-looking sweets – fat, sugary sticks of striped rock. Liza wore a new dress, her hair in tight plaits. A worried look on her face, she kept offering me food and insisting I eat as if my mother had prepared it. The parrot, its eyes covered by a leather band, slept. From time to time the organ let out a sing-song wheeze all on its own. The organ grinder explained that this was caused by some air trapped in its pipes.

It was already September. Twilight was approaching. No one who has never been in Kiev in autumn could ever imagine the delicate beauty of those hours. The first star catches fire up in the sky. Autumn’s lush gardens wait in silence, knowing the stars must fall to earth and the gardens will catch them in their dense foliage, as if in a hammock, and then set them down on the ground so gently that no one in town will wake up or even know.

Liza saw me home. She thrust a sticky pink sweet in my hand as a parting gift and then ran off down the stairs. And I, knowing I would be in trouble for returning so late, stood for a long time trying to find the courage to ring the bell.

9

Winter Scenes

My father gave me a pair of Halifax ice skates for Christmas. Boys nowadays would laugh at such skates, but back then there were no better skates in the world than those from the city of Halifax.

Where is this city? I used to ask everyone. Where was this old city of Halifax, buried in snow, where all the boys had skates like mine? Where was this wintry land inhabited by aged sailors and bright schoolboys? No one could tell me. Borya, the eldest of us boys in the family, supposed that Halifax did not refer to a city, but to the name of the skates' manufacturer. My father believed Halifax was a small town – yes, that's right, he said, a town on the island of Newfoundland off the northern coast of America and it was famous not only for its ice skates but for its sled-dogs.

The skates lay on my table. I looked at them and thought about the town of Halifax. After receiving the skates, I immediately imagined this town and saw it so clearly in my mind that I could have drawn a detailed map with all its streets and squares.

I could sit at the table over my Malinin and Burenin arithmetic book – I was preparing that winter for my entrance examinations to the gymnasium – for hours on end thinking about Halifax. This aspect of my character frightened Mama. She worried about my 'fantasies' and liked to say that poverty and death in a ditch would come to little boys like me. This dismal prediction – 'you'll end up dead in a ditch' – was popular back then. For some reason death in a ditch was considered to be particularly shameful. I heard this prediction often, but still more often Mama said that I had 'dislocated brains that weren't anything like other people's'. She worried that I would end up a failure.

Father was furious whenever he heard this and would say to Mama: 'Let him be a failure, or a beggar, or a tramp, or whatever, I don't care, just as long as he doesn't grow up to be one of those damned Kiev philistines!'

With time I too became rather afraid and embarrassed by my imagination. It seemed to me I was wasting my time on nonsense, while all around me everyone else was engaged in serious matters: my brothers and sister went to the gymnasium and worked hard on their lessons, my father served in the management of the South-West Railway, and Mama sewed and kept the house. I alone lived cut off from the general cares of the world, wasting my time doing nothing.

'I wish you'd go skating rather than just sit around dreaming up heaven knows what,' said Mama. 'What a funny little boy! Just look at yourself !'

I went out to skate. The winter days were short. It grew dark while I was still on the ice. A military band appeared and started to play. Little coloured lights were lit. Schoolgirls in fur coats, their hands tucked inside small muffs, skated in large circles, swaying from side to side. The boys skated backwards or 'pistol-fashion' – crouched down on one leg with the other stuck straight out. This was considered the height of style. I envied them.

I returned home tired and red-cheeked from the cold. But my heart was still beset by worry, because even after skating, I could feel that same dangerous inclination to daydreaming.

On the ice I often met my sister Galya's friend – Katyusha Desnitskaya, a pupil in the upper forms at the Fundukleevskaya Gymnasium for Girls. She also had Halifax skates, although her blades were made of burnished, black steel. My brother Borya, a pupil at the local maths and science school at the time, was courting Katyusha. They waltzed together on the ice. First, the speedskaters would clear a wide circle on the ice, cuffing the street boys on their homemade skates to get them to stop horsing around. Then, a slow, gliding dance would begin. Even Kovarík, the red-haired Czech bandmaster, turned round to watch the dance. A sweet smile stretched from ear to ear on his ruddy face.

Desnitskaya's long plaits flew about in time with the music. They got in her way, and so, without stopping, she placed them on her chest and gazed haughtily out from under her half-closed eyes at her admiring public. I watched Borya with malicious joy. He did not dance as well as Katyusha. Sometimes he even lost an edge and slipped on his Yacht Club skates, which he was so proud of. I never could have imagined that day on the ice that Desnitskaya's life would become more unbelievable than any of my fantasies.

One of the sons of the king of Siam, Prince Chakrabongse, had been a student at the Corps des Pages in

St Petersburg. Once on his way home he fell ill with pneumonia and was brought to Kiev and placed in the tsar's palace, where he was attended to by a number of local doctors. The prince recovered, but before he could continue his journey to Siam he first had to rest in Kiev for two months. He became bored. Every last effort was made to entertain him – he was taken to balls at the Merchants' Club, to charity galas and raffles, to the circus, to the theatre.

At one of these balls the prince saw Katyusha Desnitskaya. She was dancing a waltz, just as she had done on the ice, her plaits falling down over her chest and her half-closed lids partially concealing her haughty blue eyes that she cast about the room. The prince was enchanted. A short man with tawny skin, slanting eyes and hair that shone as if it had been rubbed down with shoe polish, he fell in love with Katyusha. He departed for Siam, but then soon returned to Kiev incognito and proposed to Katyusha. She accepted. The girls at the gymnasium were shocked. With one voice they insisted that were they in her position none of them would marry an Asian no matter what, even if he were the son of a king.

Katyusha went off to Siam. Soon thereafter the king died of some tropical disease, and then the eldest prince, and heir to the throne, also died. Katyusha's husband was the late king's second son. He had had little hope of ascending the throne. But following the death of his brother he became the lone heir and was crowned the new king. Thus Katyusha, a carefree schoolgirl from Kiev, became the queen of Siam.

The courtiers hated their foreign queen. Her very existence violated the traditions of the royal court of Siam. Katyusha ordered that electricity be brought to Bangkok. This was the straw that broke the courtiers' backs. It is said that they decided to poison this queen who had sought to improve the nation's ancient customs. And so, they supposedly gathered old electric lightbulbs and ground the glass into a fine powder that they mixed into her food. Within six months she was dead from intestinal bleeding.

Her king erected a memorial on her grave. A tall elephant of black marble, a golden crown on its head, its trunk hanging despondently, was placed in thick grass that reached up to its knees. It is beneath this grass that Katyusha Desnitskaya, the young queen of Siam, lies.[1]

Afterwards, every time I set foot on that ice, I recalled Katyusha waltzing to 'Irretrievable Time' under the direction of the bandmaster and the way she would brush the snow from her forehead and brow with her mittens, and I recalled her skates of black steel – those skates from the city of Halifax, home to all those kind-hearted old sailors. I wish I could have told them the story of Katyusha. At first, they would have gaped in astonishment, then flushed with anger at the courtiers, and finally just shaken their heads as they contemplated the vicissitudes of human fortune.

•

In the wintertime I went to the theatre with my family.

The first work I saw was *The Capture of Izmail*. I didn't like it all. This was because I had spied a man wearing glasses and shiny velvet trousers in the wings standing next to Suvorov who then proceeded to shove him so hard in the back that Suvorov leapt out onto the stage crowing like a cock. The second, however, Rostand's *La Princesse Lointaine*, took my breath away.[2] It had everything to stir my imagination: a ship's deck, enormous sails, troubadours, knights, a princess.

I fell in love with the Solovtsovsky Theatre, with its powder-blue velvet upholstery and its cosy boxes. After each performance my parents could not drag me out of the theatre no matter how hard they tried until all the lights had been extinguished. The darkness of the hall, the lingering smell of perfume and orange peel – all this enticed me so that I dreamed of hiding under my seat and spending the whole night alone in the empty theatre. As a child I was unable to distinguish between the drama on the stage and real life, and so I genuinely suffered and even fell ill after every performance.

The theatre fed my passion for reading. It was enough just to see *Madame Sans-Gêne* to make me devour every last book about Napoleon. The various periods and people I had seen on the stage came to life for me in a miraculous way and were filled with a rare attraction and charm.

It wasn't just the plays that I loved. I loved the theatre's long corridors with their mirrors in faded gilt frames, the dark cloakrooms that smelled of fur, the mother-of-pearl opera glasses, the impatient stamping of horses' hooves waiting before the entrance. During the interval I liked to run to the end of the corridor to look out of the window. It was pitch black outside. All I could make out was the white of the snow on the trees. Then I would quickly turn round to take in the light of the sumptuous hall, the chandeliers, the lustre of the women's hair, their bracelets and earrings, and the velvet stage curtain that gently rippled in a warm draught. I did this over and over – first looking out of the window, then at the hall, then out of the window, then at the hall. It made me so happy.

I did not like opera. Apparently, this was because the first one my parents took me to was Rubinstein's *Demon*.[3] The lead performer had heavy lips and a greasy, impudent face, and he sang his part of the demon in a lazy and sloppy sort of way. He wore hardly any makeup. This large, pot-bellied figure of a

man looked silly in his long black muslin shirt, complete with spangles, and wings affixed to his back. He sang with such a pronounced burr that I couldn't keep from laughing. Mama became indignant and never took me to the opera again.

Aunt Dozia came to stay with us from Gorodishche every winter. Mama loved to take her to the theatre. She always had trouble sleeping the night before. Several hours before the performance even started, she put on a loose-fitting dress of brown satin, embroidered with yellow flowers and leaves, tossed a matching brown shawl over her shoulders, and grabbed her tiny lace handkerchief. A bit anxious but now looking a good ten years younger, she and Mama would leave for the theatre in a droshky. Just like all women from the Ukrainian countryside, Aunt Dozia covered her head with a black kerchief decorated with little roses.

Everyone at the theatre couldn't help but stare at Aunt Dozia, but she was so taken by the performance that she didn't notice a thing. Mama took her mostly to Ukrainian plays and operas – *Natalya from Poltava*, *A Cossack beyond the Danube* and *Shelmenko the Driver*. Once Aunt Dozia jumped out of her seat at a performance and shouted in Ukrainian at the villain: 'Such impudence! Just what do you think you're doing, you wretch!' The audience roared with laughter. Down came the curtain. Aunt Dozia cried the whole next day from shame and kept apologising to my father. Nothing we did could calm her down.

It was with Aunt Dozia that we went to the cinema for the first time. Back then the cinema was called 'L'Illusion' or 'Cinématographe Lumière'. The first showing was arranged in the Opera House. My father was ecstatic over the illusion and hailed it as one of the marvellous innovations of the twentieth century.

A damp grey sheet had been stretched across the stage. Then the chandeliers were extinguished. A sinister greenish light appeared on the sheet followed by some jumping black spots. Directly over our heads a smoky shaft of light coursed through the darkness. There came a horrifying sizzling sound, as if someone were roasting a whole wild boar behind our backs. Aunt Dozia asked Mama: 'Why does it crackle like that, this illusion? Do you think we'll all be burnt like chickens in a coop?'

After a lot of blinking a title appeared on the sheet: *The Terrible Eruption of Mount Pelée and Destruction of St Pierre, Martinique. A Travel-Film*. The screen shook and then, as if through a dust storm, a volcano appeared. Burning lava erupted from deep inside. Everyone was overwhelmed by the spectacle, and they began making a loud noise that spread throughout the hall. Next we were shown a comic picture about life in a French barracks. A drummer beat his drum as soldiers woke up, jumped out of bed and began to pull on their trousers. A large rat fell out of one soldier's trouser legs. It ran around the barracks as the soldiers, terrified and their eyes bulging in exaggerated fashion, climbed onto their beds and hung from the doors and windows. With that, the film ended.

'Pure buffoonery!' Mama said. 'Just like the shows they put on at the Contract Fair, except those are much more interesting.' Father remarked that unimaginative folks had laughed in just the same way at Stephenson's steam locomotive,[4] and Aunt Dozia, in an attempt to make peace, said: 'Who needs these illusions anyway? Not the sort of thing for us women to bother ourselves with.'

The side-shows at the Contract Fair were in fact quite interesting. We loved the fair and waited anxiously all winter long for it to open. It always took place at the end of winter in the Podol part of town in the old Contract House and the many wooden booths set up around it. The fair typically opened during the first thaw when the dirt roads all turned to mud. The strong smells of the various wares travelled far – new barrels, leather, gingerbread and calico. I especially liked the merry-go-round, the toys and the panopticon. Buttery blocks of vanilla and chocolate halva crunched under the salesmen's knives. Translucent pieces of rose and lemon Turkish delight stuck to my teeth. Huge earthenware platters were piled with pyramids of sugared pears, plums and cherries – the work of Kiev's famous confectioner Balabukha.

Roughly carved wooden soldiers finished in cheap paint stood in rows on bast mats laid out over the muddy ground – Cossacks in tall hats and wide trousers with crimson piping, drummers with fierce, bulging eyes, buglers with tassels on their horns. Clay whistles lay in piles. Cheerful old men jostled through the crowd hawking strange and alluring toys, like the 'Man from the Sea', which turned out to be just a small rubber figure in the shape of a devil that dived and twisted about in a glass jar filled with water.

We were immersed in a deafening noise – the hawkers' cries, the clang of metal cart wheels, the bells of the Bratsky Bogoyavlensky Monastery ringing for Lent, and the squeals of little boys on the merry-go-round. For a few kopecks extra, the merry-go-round spun so fast that everything turned into a motley confusion of grinning, papier-mâché horses' heads, neckties, boots, swelling skirts, coloured garters, lace and kerchiefs. Sometimes the relentless twirling caused a necklace to break, sending glass beads flying like bullets into the faces of the spectators.

The panopticon scared me a little, especially the wax figures. The murdered French president Carnot[5]

lay smiling on the floor in his dress coat with a ceremonial star pinned to it. Unnaturally thick blood – it looked like red Vaseline – oozed down his shirt front. Carnot seemed pleased at having died so efficiently. A wax Cleopatra pressed a black asp to her firm, greenish breast. A mermaid with violet eyes lay in a zinc bathtub. Her grimy scales reflected the dim light of a single electric bulb. The water in the tub was murky. A boa constrictor slept on an eiderdown in an open trunk covered with wire netting. Every so often he tensed his muscles, and the visitors stepped back in fear.

A stuffed gorilla, surrounded by dense foliage of painted wood shavings, carried off a swooning girl with long, flowing blond hair into the forest depths. For three kopecks you could shoot at the gorilla with a Monte Cristo pistol and try to save the girl. If you hit the round target on its chest, the gorilla dropped what proved to be a rag doll. A thick cloud of dust went up every time she hit the floor. Next, a chintz curtain was drawn for a minute, and then the gorilla reappeared, as fierce as before, and once again he carried the girl off into that dense and oddly coloured forest.

We also loved the Contract Fair because it heralded the approach of Easter, our trip to Grandmother in Cherkassy, and then the always magnificent and unforgettable Kiev spring.

[1] In fact, Yekaterina Desnitskaya (b. 1886) lived until 1960. She married Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath (1883–1920) in 1906 and returned with him to Bangkok. They had one son, and then divorced in 1919.

[2] Alexander Suvorov (1729–1800), celebrated general and field marshal; Edmond Rostand (1868–1918), French dramatist and poet.

[3] Anton Rubinstein (1829–94), pianist and composer.

[4] George Stephenson (1781–1848), British engineer known as the ‘Father of Railways’.

[5] Marie François Carnot (1837–94), statesman and French president, assassinated while in office by an Italian anarchist.

10

The Midshipman

Spring in Kiev began when the Dnieper overflowed its banks. All one had to do was go out onto Vladimirskaya Hill on the edge of town and there before your eyes lay an expansive sea of bluish water.

But it wasn't just the Dnieper that flooded. Every spring Kiev witnessed a flood of sunlight, of freshness and of soft, fragrant breezes. On Bibikovsky Boulevard the cone-shaped poplars blossomed and filled the neighbouring streets with the smell of incense. The chestnut trees put out their first leaves – translucent, wrinkled and covered with a faint reddish fur. By the time the yellow and pink candles had blossomed on the chestnut trees, spring had reached its height. Waves of cool air, the scent of young grass and the sound of new, rustling leaves poured out of the ancient parks and into the city streets.

Caterpillars crawled along the pavement, even on Kreshchatik. The wind swept dried petals into piles. Cockchafers and butterflies flew into the trams through the open windows. The nightingales sang in the dark, front gardens. The fluff from the poplars swirled over the pavements like the surf upon the Black Sea. Dandelions yellowed along the roadside. Striped awnings were lowered against the sun over the open windows of the pastry shops and coffee houses. Sprigs of lilac, sprinkled with water, stood in vases on the restaurant tables. The young girls of Kiev searched among the lilacs for a five-petalled bloom. Under their straw summer hats the girls' faces acquired a matt ochre hue.

Spring was the season of Kiev's parks. I spent all my days in them. I played there, did my lessons there, read there. I went home only to eat and sleep.

I knew every corner of the enormous Botanical Gardens with its gullies, its pond and the thick shadows of its ancient lime-tree allées. But my favourite was Mariinsky Park in Lipki near the palace. It overlooked the Dnieper. Its walls of purple and white lilac, three times a man's height, swayed and hummed with great swarms of bees. Fountains scattered among its meadows shot water high into the air.

A wide belt of parks stretched along the red-clay cliffs overhanging the Dnieper – Mariinsky Park, Palace Park, the Tsars' Park and the Merchants' Park, which was famous for its expansive view of Podol. The people of Kiev were especially proud of this view. A symphony orchestra played in the Merchants' Park all summer long. The only thing that disturbed the sound of the music were the long hoots of the steamers' whistles that wafted up from the Dnieper. The final park along the banks was Vladimirskaya Hill. Here stood the monument to Prince Vladimir, holding a large bronze cross in his hand. Electric lights had been affixed to the cross. When they turned them on at night the fiery cross appeared to hang high up in the sky over the steep slopes of Kiev.

The city was so beautiful in the spring that I never could understand Mama's passion for those obligatory Sunday trips out to Boyarka, the Voditsa Woods or Darnitsa in the surrounding countryside. I was bored by the Voditsa Woods and their dachas, each one just like the others, indifferent to Boyarka and its scraggy allée dedicated to the poet Nadson,[1] and hated Darnitsa with its pines ringed by trampled grass and its thick, heavy, cigarette-butt-littered sands.

One spring day I sat reading Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* in Mariinsky Park. Galya, my sister, sat next to me reading as well. Her summer hat lay beside her on the bench. The hat's green ribbons stirred in the wind. Galya was short-sighted and very trusting and it was almost impossible to upset her gentle nature.

It had rained that morning, but now a clear, bright spring sky shone overhead. Now and then a few last raindrops fell from the lilacs. A girl with bows in her hair stopped in front of us and started skipping with a rope. She was disturbing my reading. I shook the lilac tree. A light rain splashed the girl and Galya. The girl stuck out her tongue at me and ran off. Galya just wiped the raindrops off her book and continued reading.

It was at this very moment that I caught sight of the man who for a long time to come was to poison my mind with dreams of an unattainable future.

Casually strolling down the allée came a tall, tanned midshipman. A straight, black cutlass hung from his shiny belt. Black ribbons decorated with bronze anchors fluttered in the breeze. He was all in black. A few glittering gold stripes were the only bits of colour on his severe uniform. Sailors were a rarity in land-locked Kiev, and we almost never saw them. Yet here was a visitor from the remote and legendary

world of the great sailing ships, like the frigate *Pallada*, from the world of all the oceans and seas, all the ports, all the winds, and all the fascination that goes with the exotic life of a seafarer. His old, black-hilted sword appeared in Mariinsky Park as if it had just leapt from the pages of Stevenson.

The midshipman walked past, the gravel crunching under his feet. Galya was too short-sighted to notice my disappearance. All my dreams of the sea were embodied in this man. I had often imagined the sea, foggy and gold in the evening calm, and myself on some distant voyage, the whole world changing before my eyes like the quickly shifting shapes in a kaleidoscope. My God, if only someone had thought at the time to gift me a piece of crusty rust off an old anchor! I would have cherished it like a jewel.

The midshipman stopped and looked around. On the black ribbon of his sailor's cap I read the mysterious word *Azimut*. I later learned that this was the name of a training ship of the Baltic fleet. I followed him down Yelizavetinskaya Street, then down Institutskaya, and Nikolaevskaya. He saluted the passing infantry officers with such casual style that I became ashamed of our clumsy Kievan warriors. He looked back a few times and then stopped at the corner of Meringovskaya Street and called me over.

'Little boy,' he asked playfully, 'why are you following in my wake like some tugboat?'

I blushed and said nothing.

'I see. Dreams of becoming a sailor, does he?' the midshipman said, referring to me for some reason in the third person.

'I'm short-sighted,' I told him despondently.

The midshipman placed a lean hand on my shoulder. 'Let's go to Kreshchatik.'

We walked side by side. I didn't dare to look up and kept my eyes on his stout boots, which had been polished to an impossible shine.

When we reached Kreshchatik the midshipman led me into Café Semadeni and ordered two pistachio ice creams and two glasses of water. We sat down to eat our ice cream at a small three-legged marble table. The marble was very cold and covered with scribbled figures: brokers from the stock exchange gathered at Semadeni and counted their profits and losses on the tables. We ate our ice cream in silence. The midshipman took from his wallet a photograph of a magnificent corvette fully rigged and with a large funnel. He handed it to me and said: 'Keep it as a memento. This is my ship. I sailed on her to Liverpool.'

He gave me a firm handshake and left. I sat a while longer until the sweaty businessmen in their boaters started to stare. I got up and stumbled out and then ran all the way back to Mariinsky Park. The bench was empty. Galya had gone. I realised that the midshipman had felt sorry for me and learned for the first time that pity leaves a bitter feeling in one's heart.

After that encounter the desire to become a sailor tormented me for many years. I yearned for the sea. I had seen it once when I visited Novorossiisk with my father for a few days. But that, of course, had not been enough. For hours I would sit with my atlas, studying the coastlines of the oceans and looking up obscure ports, capes, islands and estuaries. I dreamed up a complicated game. I created a long list of steamers with important-sounding names: *North Star*, *Walter Scott*, *Khingan*, *Sirius*. The list grew daily. I had become the owner of the largest fleet in the world.

It goes without saying that I sat in my own shipping office, enveloped in cigar smoke and surrounded by colourful posters and sailing schedules. My large windows looked out onto the quay, quite naturally. The steamers' yellow masts clanked from the rhythmic rocking of the water, and I could see the elms swaying in the gentle sea breeze. Smoke from the ships wafted through the open windows and mixed with the smell of old brine and fresh, new matting. I plotted the most astonishing routes for my ships. They visited every possible corner of the globe. They even sailed to the islands of Tristan da Cunha. I switched the steamers from one route to another. I followed my ships' sailings and always knew exactly where they were at any moment, be it the *Admiral Istomin*, for example, loading bananas in Singapore on the same day that the *Flying Dutchman* was unloading flour in the Faroe Islands. Running such an enormous shipping operation required a great deal of information. And so, I pored over guidebooks, nautical reference works and anything else that had the remotest connection with the sea.

It was then I heard the word 'meningitis' from Mama for the first time. 'Lord knows what all your games will lead to,' Mama said. 'As long as it doesn't end with meningitis.'

I had heard that meningitis was a disease that struck young boys who learned to read at too young an age, and so I just laughed at Mama's fears. It ended, in fact, with my parents' decision to spend our summer holiday at the sea. Now I realise that Mama had hoped this would cure me of my extraordinary infatuation with the sea. She thought that, as usually happens, I would be disappointed after encountering the reality of my dreams, dreams which I had been chasing with so much passion. And she was right, but only partially.

[1] Semën Nadson (1862–87), popular poet at the turn of the twentieth century.

11

What Paradise Looks Like

One day Mama solemnly announced that in a few days we were all leaving to spend the summer holiday on the Black Sea in the small town of Gelendzhik near Novorossiisk. She could not have picked a better place than Gelendzhik to cure me of my infatuation for the sea and the south.

In those days Gelendzhik was a terribly hot, dusty little town devoid of greenery. The vegetation for many kilometres around had been destroyed by the savage Novorossiisk wind, the so-called North-Easter. Nothing but Jerusalem thorn and stunted acacias with parched little flowers grew in the gardens. The high mountains radiated stifling heat. At the end of the bay a cement factory belched smoke.

But Gelendzhik Bay itself was lovely. Large jellyfish, like pink and blue flowers, swam in its warm and clear waters. Spotted flounders and pop-eyed bullheads lay on its sandy bottom. The surf tossed up onto the beach red seaweed, the broken remnants of fishing nets, and bits of dark green glass from old bottles worn smooth by the action of the waves. Even after Gelendzhik the sea lost none of its charm for me. It simply became more ordinary and so more beautiful than my exquisite dreams.

In Gelendzhik I became friends with an elderly boatman by the name of Anastas. He was Greek, from the town of Volos. He had a new sailing boat, white with a red hull and a latticed deck that he had buffed to a high sheen. Anastas took summer residents out for trips on his boat. He was known for his skill and steadiness as a sailor, and so Mama sometimes let me go out alone with Anastas.

Once Anastas and I sailed out of the bay into the open sea. I shall never forget the terror and joy I felt when the sail filled with air and our boat heeled so far over that the water slapped against the gunwales. We crashed into enormous, thundering waves, translucently green and covering our faces with salty spray. I grabbed the shrouds and wished I were back on shore, but Anastas, clamping down on the pipe between his teeth, just hummed to himself and then said: ‘Oh, what nice shoes you have! How much did your mother pay for them?’ He nodded at my *chuvyaki*, soft leather shoes popular in the Caucasus.

My legs were shaking. I didn’t say a word. Anastas yawned and said: ‘It’s nothing! Just a little shower, and a warm one at that. You’ll have a good appetite after this. Your mama and papa won’t have to beg you to finish your dinner!’

He turned the sailing boat around with ease. It shipped water, and we sailed back towards the bay, diving and leaping through the waves which passed under our stern with a menacing roar. Horror-struck, I felt my heart stop.

All of a sudden Anastas began singing. I immediately stopped shaking, transfixed by this puzzling song:

> From Batumi to Sukhumi – Ai-vai-vai!
> From Sukhumi to Batumi – Ai-vai-vai!
> A boy did run, with his toy – Ai-vai-vai!
> But down he fell and broke his toy – Ai-vai-vai!

We furled our sail to this tune and glided up to the pier where Mama was waiting for me, pale as a sheet. Anastas lifted me out of the boat and onto the pier and then said: ‘He’s good and salty for you, madame. Got his sea legs now, he has.’

Another day my father hired a carriage and we drove out to Mikhailovsky Pass. At first the flinty road wound its way up the barren, dusty mountain slopes. We crossed bridges over ravines without so much as a drop of water. All day long the same grey, dry, cotton-wool clouds clung to the mountain peaks. I was thirsty. The red-headed Cossack driver turned around and told me to wait until we reached the pass and there I’d find plenty of refreshing, cool water to quench my thirst. I didn’t believe him. The dry, waterless mountains frightened me. I looked with longing on the dark, watery strip of sea below us. You couldn’t drink it, but at least one could bathe in its cool waters. The road climbed ever higher. Suddenly, I felt cool air on my face.

‘The pass!’ said the driver. He stopped the horses, climbed down, and secured the carriage with some metal blocks under the wheels.

Over the ridge we saw enormous, dense forests stretching across the mountains to the horizon. Here

and there red granite cliffs poked through the greenery, and far off in the distance I could see the summit blazing with ice and snow.

'The North-Easter doesn't reach this far,' said the driver. 'It's paradise up here.'

The carriage started to descend. All of a sudden, we found ourselves in a dark shadow. We could hear coming from the impenetrable forest the rush of water, bird calls and the sound of leaves ruffled by the troubled midday wind. The farther we descended the denser became the forest and the darker the shadows upon the road. Soon a small, clear stream appeared on the side of the road. It had a bed of coloured stones and was bordered by purple flowers which the rushing water tugged at and bent but was unable to rip free of the stony ground and sweep downstream into the gorge.

Mama scooped a cupful of water from the stream and gave it to me to drink. The water was so cold the outside of the cup was quickly covered with condensation.

'It smells of ozone,' said Father.

I took a deep breath. I didn't recognise the smell, but it seemed to me as if I had been covered in heaps of rain-soaked twigs. Vines of clematis plucked at our hair. Small fluffy flowers poking out here and there from cracks in the road gazed with curiosity at our carriage and the grey horses, who, as if on parade, held their heads high and stepped ever so carefully so as not to lose control on the steep incline and crash.

'There's a lizard!' said Mama.

'Where?'

'Over there. See the nut tree? Just to the left there's a red rock in the grass. Look just a bit farther. Do you see the yellow flower? That's an azalea. And a tad to the right of the azalea, near the beech tree lying on the ground. Do you see the shaggy reddish root poking out of the dry earth and the tiny blue flowers? It's right there.'

I spotted the lizard, but only after my eyes had soaked up the sight of the nut tree, the red rock, the flowers of the azalea and the fallen beech.

So, this is the Caucasus! I thought.

'It's a paradise!' said the driver once again as he turned off the main road onto a narrow, grassy path cut into the woods. 'We'll stop up ahead and go for a swim.'

The path through the thicket narrowed. Branches began slapping us in the face, and so we had to stop the carriage, climb down and continue on foot. The carriage followed slowly after us. We came to a clearing in the middle of a green gorge. Tall clumps of dandelions poked out of the thick grass like white islands. In the shadow of some large beech trees we spied an empty old barn alongside a noisy mountain stream. The clear water eddied over the stones, gurgling and bubbling as it flowed.

While the driver unharnessed the horses and went to fetch fire-wood with my father, we washed in the river. After the cold water our faces felt even hotter. We wanted to go exploring up the river, but Mama had spread a blanket on the grass and unpacked the provisions and said that she was not about to let us go anywhere until we had eaten. I gave in and sat down to eat a ham sandwich and cold rice pudding, but it turned out I had gulped down my food for no good reason. The obstinate copper tea kettle simply refused to boil on the fire, most likely because the water from the stream was as cold as ice.

Then, all of a sudden, the kettle boiled over and put out the fire. We drank the strong tea in a hurry and began pestering Father to finish so we could go and explore the woods. The driver said to be careful because there were a lot of wild boar in the forest. He told us that should we come across small holes dug in the ground, this was a sign they had been sleeping in the area. Mama started to worry, although she couldn't go with us since vigorous walks left her short of breath, but the driver calmed her down, saying that the boar only attacked people if they were provoked.

We headed off upstream. Pushing through the thicket, we stopped along the way to point out to each other the blue sparks of trout swimming in the river's granite pools, or enormous green insects with long antennae, or foamy, thrashing waterfalls, or horsetails taller than ourselves, or carpets of wood anemones and peony-filled glades. Borya stumbled upon a small dusty hole, shaped something like a baby's bath. We carefully went around it. Most likely it was the bed for some wild boar.

Father had walked on ahead. He started calling to us. We struggled through buckthorn and made our way around some massive, mossy boulders before eventually catching up with him. He was standing near a strange structure covered with brambles. We could make out four massive, smoothly hewn rocks standing upright, with a fifth over the top of them like a roof. It was some sort of stone house. In one of the sides an opening had been cut, but it was so small that even I couldn't squeeze through it. There were several other such stone structures nearby.

'They're dolmens,' said my father. 'Ancient tombs of the Scythians. But then again, maybe they weren't tombs. Scholars still aren't certain who built these dolmens, why they built them, or even how.'

I was certain that these dolmens were the homes of a long extinct race of dwarflike people. But I didn't say that to my father. Borya was with us, and I knew he'd laugh at me. We returned to Gelendzhik burnt by the sun and drunk with fatigue and forest air. I fell asleep, yet through my slumber I could feel the hot air on my body and heard the distant roar of the sea.

After that I imagined that I was the owner of yet another magnificent land – the Caucasus. I lost myself in Lermontov, in the fierce mountain tribesmen, in Shamil.[1] Once again, Mama began to worry.

Now, as a grown man, I recall my childhood enthusiasms with gratitude. They taught me a lot. What's more, I never was one of those overly excited little boys, loud and spittle-mouthed and disturbing everyone's peace. No, I was quite shy and kept my passions to myself.

[1] Imam Shamil (1797–1871), political and spiritual leader of the northern Caucasus who led the military resistance to Russian expansion.

12

The Forests of Bryansk

In the autumn of 1902, I was to enrol in the preparatory class of the First Kiev Gymnasium. My elder brother Vadim was already a pupil there, and having heard his stories about the school I was afraid to go, and sometimes even cried and begged my mother to let me stay at home.

'Do you really want to be an extern?' Mama asked in a startled voice. 'Extern' was the name for a boy who studied at home and only visited the school once a year to take examinations. From my two brothers I knew well the nightmarish fate of these externs. They were deliberately failed in their exams, humiliated in every way, and expected to know much more than the regular schoolboys. The externs could not look to anyone for help – no one would even prompt them. I pictured these boys exhausted from cramming, their eyes all cried out, and their ears blood red with anxiety. It was a pitiful image. I gave in.

'Well, all right,' I said. 'I won't be an extern.'

'Cry baby! Little mama's boy!' yelled Borya from his room.

'Don't you dare hurt his feelings!' Mama seethed. She considered Borya heartless and could never understand why he was so hard and unfeeling. Obviously, it was from our Turkish grandmother. Everyone else in the family was exceptionally sensitive, affectionate and impractical.

My father knew of my worries, tears and anxieties, and found, as always, an unexpected remedy for my miseries. After a minor row with my mother, he decided to send me on my own to her brother, Uncle Nikolai Grigorievich. This was the very same Uncle Kolya, the cheerful cadet, who would come from St Petersburg to visit Grandmother in Cherkassy and loved to waltz with Aunt Nadya. Now he was a military engineer, married, and stationed in the town of Bryansk in Orël province, where he worked at an antiquated factory called the Arsenal that produced gun-carriages. Uncle Kolya had taken a dacha for the summer near Bryansk on the old rundown Rëvny estate in the Bryansk forest and invited us all to come and visit. My parents accepted, but they could not come until after my sister and brothers had completed their exams, and so I was sent on ahead by myself.

'Let him get used to being on his own,' Father said. 'It's good for such shy little boys.'

He wrote Uncle Kolya a letter. What it said I don't know. Mama, furtively wiping away her tears, packed a small suitcase for me that had everything I might need, including a note with a list of dos and don'ts. They bought me a second-class ticket to the station of Sinezërki. From there it was ten versts to my uncle's dacha. Everyone, even Borya, saw me off at the station. My father said something to the grey-haired conductor and gave him some money.

'I'll see he gets there safe and sound,' the conductor said to Mama. 'You have no cause to worry, madam.'

Mama asked the passengers in my compartment to keep an eye on me and not let me leave the train at the stations along the way. They willingly agreed. I was terribly embarrassed and kept tugging on Mama's sleeve. At the second whistle they all kissed me goodbye, even Borya, who then sneaked in when no one was looking what we called a 'pear' – a painful thump with his thumb on the top of my head. Then they left the train, all except Mama, that is, who couldn't leave. She held my hands.

'Be a good boy, understand?' she said. 'A good, sensible boy. And be very careful!'

She looked at me with searching eyes. The third whistle sounded. She hugged me and made quickly for the exit, her skirts rustling behind her. She jumped down as the train began to pull out. Father caught her in his arms and shook his head.

I stood at the closed window and watched as Mama walked swiftly down the platform ahead of the others, and only then did I realise how pretty she was, how petite, how tender. My tears fell onto the dusty window frame. Long after Mama and the platform were gone, I still stood at the window, looking out as the sidings, goods trains and screeching shunting engines rushed past and the new Gothic-style Catholic church being built on Vasilkovskaya Street appeared and then seemed to rotate before my eyes. I was afraid to turn round and show the other passengers my tear-stained face. Then I remembered that a telegram had been sent to Uncle Kolya about my arrival. A sense of pride that I had been deemed worthy of a real telegram calmed me a bit, and I turned round.

The compartment was upholstered in red velvet. It was small and cosy. Tiny reflections of sunlight darted from one corner of the dusty compartment to the other, as if on command, and then back again, while the train broke free of the tangled outskirts of Kiev and rocked from side to side along a series of curves. They'd put me in a compartment reserved for ladies. Mama had insisted on it. I cautiously examined my fellow passengers. One of them, a dark and withered Frenchwoman, gave me a few quick nods, smiled, exposing a mouth of horsy teeth, and offered me a box of candied fruit. I didn't know what to do, but thanked her and took one. It made my hands all sticky.

'Quick, put it in your mouth!' said a girl of about sixteen in a brown school uniform with cheerful, slanting eyes. 'Stop thinking and eat it!'

The Frenchwoman, evidently her governess, said something to her in French in a stern voice. The schoolgirl made a face, and with that the governess launched into a long and angry tirade, the words flying out of her. The schoolgirl didn't wait to hear the end, but got up and went out into the corridor.

'Young people nowadays!' said a short, fat old woman with a mouth like a bagel. Indeed, behind her hung a string bag full of bagels sprinkled with poppy seeds. 'Oh, I just can't bear these young people!'

'Yes, yes!' nodded the Frenchwoman. 'Nothing but disobedience. Just *fif* and whims!'

I didn't know what 'fif' meant, but guessed it was something bad because the old woman raised her eyes to the ceiling and let out such a loud sigh that even the Frenchwoman gave her a look. I wanted to look out, so I went into the corridor. The schoolgirl was already there, standing by an open window.

'Ah, Vitya!' she said to me. 'Come here, we'll look out together.'

'I'm not Vitya,' I said, blushing.

'Never mind, come here.'

I climbed up onto the radiator and stuck my head out of the window. The train was crossing the Dnieper. I could see the Pechersk Monastery and Kiev off in the distance and the shallows of the Dnieper where it had deposited islands of sand alongside the foundations of the bridge.

'Beastly old witch!' said the girl. 'Madame Demi-Femme! But you needn't be afraid of her. She's actually quite a nice old lady.'

This first trip on my own wore me out, mostly since I spent almost the whole time standing by the open window. But I was happy. For the first time I experienced the freedom of travel when one has nothing to think about and nothing to do but look through the window at the fields of rye, the woods, the small stations where the barefoot peasant women sold their milk, at the little streams, the signalmen, the station masters in their dusty red caps, the geese, and the village boys who'd run after the train shouting: 'Uncle, toss me a kopeck!'

In those days it was a long, roundabout route to Bryansk – through Lvov and Navlya. The train didn't get to Sinezërki until the third day. The train was in no hurry, it rested at each station for a good long while, puffing beside the water tower. The passengers would hop off and run to the buffet for hot water for their tea or to buy fresh strawberries and roast chicken from the peasant women. After that, everyone would settle down. Long after it was time to depart, a sleepy stillness reigned over the station, the hot sun burned, the clouds drifted, dragging behind them their dark blue shadows over the ground, the passengers dozed in the carriages, and still the train just stood there, motionless. The only sound was that of the engine, sighing and dripping hot oily water onto the sand. At last the fat chief conductor in his canvas jacket came out of the station, stroked his moustache, brought a whistle to his lips, and let out a long, loud blast. The engine made no reply, and just kept on sighing. Then the conductor strolled lazily over to the engine and blew once more. Still, the engine did not reply. Only after the third or fourth blast did it finally emit a short, dissatisfied hoot and slowly begin to move.

I leaned out of the window because I knew that just beyond the signal box there would be a slope covered with clover and bluebells and then a pine forest. Whenever we entered a forest, the clatter of the wheels grew much louder and was caught up by an echo, just as if blacksmiths had begun to pound with their hammers throughout the whole forest. I was seeing central Russia for the first time. I liked it better than Ukraine. It was wilder, more expansive, more deserted. I liked its forests, its overgrown roads, the language of the peasants.

The old woman slept the whole time. The French governess had calmed down and was crocheting lace, while the girl sang and leaned out of the window, skilfully tearing leaves from the trees as they flew past. Every couple of hours she'd get out her basket of provisions, eat for a good long while, and force me to join her. We ate hard-boiled eggs, grilled chicken and rice *pirozhki*, and drank tea.

Then we'd hang out of the window again and become light-headed from the scent of the flowering buckwheat. The shadow of the train stumbled over the fields, and the orange light of the setting sun flooded the carriage such that in our compartment, consumed by a fiery haze, we couldn't make out a thing.

The train arrived at Sinezërki at dusk. The conductor carried my suitcase out to the platform. I was expecting either Uncle Kolya or Aunt Marusya to meet me. But there was no one on the platform. I could see the women in my compartment begin to worry. The train stopped at Sinezërki only for a minute. Then it was gone, and I remained there with my suitcase. I was certain that Uncle Kolya was just running late and would arrive at any moment. A bearded peasant in a jacket and a black peaked cap, with a whip stuck in the top of his boot, hobbled up to me. He smelled of horse sweat and hay.

'You wouldn't be Kostik, would you?' he asked. 'I've been waiting for you. Your uncle, the Captain, ordered me to meet you and bring you back safe and sound. Give me your little bag there, let's go.'

This was the final test my father had prepared for me. In his letter he'd written to Uncle Kolya that no one from the family should be there to meet me at Sinezërki. Still muttering something about my uncle, the driver – his name was Nikita – settled me on the cart's soft hay, which was covered by a thick canvas, untied the horses' oat-filled nosebags, climbed on, and off we went. At first we drove for a long time through darkening fields, then the road wound upward through the woods. Sometimes the cart rattled over a wooden bridge, black swamp water glistening below. The air was damp and smelled of sedge. A lifeless purple moon rose over the woods and the stunted thickets, a bittern called. Nikita said: 'It's a wild, wooded country around here – not many folks about. Lots of bark and water. No place smells better in all of Orël province.'

We drove into a pine wood and then descended a steep hill to a river. The pines blotted out the moon and it grew dark. Voices could be heard on the road. I began to feel a little scared.

'Is that you, Nikita?' my uncle's familiar voice called from the darkness.

'Whoa-oa!' Nikita yelled with a note of desperation as he struggled to rein in the horses. 'Of course it's us. Whoa! May the Devil take you all!'

Someone grabbed me and then lifted me out of the cart. In the faint afterglow I caught sight of the laughing eyes and white teeth of Uncle Kolya. He kissed me and then quickly handed me over to Aunt Marusya. She snuggled me like a baby, chuckling with a deep laugh, and gave off the aroma of vanilla – she must have come straight from baking something sweet. We climbed back into the cart and set off, Nikita walking beside us. We crossed an old black bridge over a deep, clear river full of reeds, and then a second bridge. A fish splashed loudly underneath it. The cart bumped up against a stone gatepost and finally we drove into an old park that was so dark it seemed the tops of the tall trees were lost amid the stars. In the very depths of the park, under a canopy of pitch-black lime trees, the cart came to a halt alongside a small wooden house whose windows were all alight. Two dogs, one white, the other black – Mordan and Chetvertak – began barking and jumped up trying to lick my face.

I spent the entire summer at the old estate of Rëvny amid the dense Bryansk forests, the rivers and the gentle peasants of Orël province, in that ancient park that was so vast no one knew where it ended and the forest began. This was to be the last summer of my true childhood.

School started in the autumn, and then our family fell apart. I wound up alone. Before leaving school, I was already earning my own living and felt like a true grown-up. Ever since that summer I have been attached to central Russia with all my heart. I know of no other land that possesses such enormous lyrical power and such touching scenic beauty – with all its melancholy, peace and expansiveness. It's difficult to measure the depth of this love. Everyone experiences it for themselves. You love every blade of grass, sparkling with dew or warmed by the sun, every cup of water drawn from a forest well, every sapling bent over a lake, its leaves somehow trembling in the calm air, every crow of the cock, and every cloud floating high across the pale sky. And if at times I wish to live to be one hundred and twenty, as old Nechipor had once predicted, then it's only because one lifetime is not enough to experience all the beauty and healing power of the Russian land.

My childhood was ending. It's so sad that we only begin to understand all the wonder of childhood as we're becoming adults. In childhood everything was different. We looked upon the world with clear light eyes, and everything appeared brighter. The sun was brighter, the fields were more fragrant, the thunder was louder, the rains were heavier, the grass was taller. And our hearts were bigger, our grief was bitterer, and a thousand-fold more mysterious was the land, our native land – the most magnificent gift of our lives. We need to tend to it, to care for and to protect it with all the strength we possess.

13

The Swarm

Unlike other boys, I had never envied Kiev officer cadets, who wore white shoulder boards decorated with yellow ciphers and stood at attention before the generals. Nor did I envy the boys at the gymnasium, even though their greatcoats of grey officers' cloth with silver buttons were considered very splendid. Since my youth I had been indifferent to all uniforms, except those worn by the men in the navy.

When, in the autumn of 1902, I first put on long trousers and a school uniform jacket, I didn't feel like myself at all for a time. It was awkward and uncomfortable. I'd become some other boy altogether with that heavy military hat on my head. I took such a strong dislike to those stiff, blue hats with their enormous insignia because they made the ears of all my comrades – pupils of the preparatory class – stick straight out. When they took the hats off, their ears would go back to normal. But as soon as they had to put them back on, out went their ears again. It was as if they'd been made especially for this purpose so it would be easier for Inspector Bodyansky to grab some poor first-year pupil by the ear as he shouted at him: 'Late again, *misérable*! Go and stand in the corner and reflect on your bitter fate!'

So, as soon as Mama bought me my hat, I did as my older brothers had done and removed the small metal hoop on the inside and tore out the satin lining. Such was the school tradition – the shabbier the hat, the more valiant the boy. 'Only swots and lickspittles go around in new hats,' my brothers said. You were supposed to sit on your hat, to carry it around in your pocket, to use it to knock chestnuts out of the trees. Only then did it acquire that battle-worn look that was the pride of every true schoolboy. My parents also bought me a satchel with a smooth deer-hide backing, a pencil case, ruled exercise books and several small preparatory textbooks. Then Mama took me to school.

Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna was staying with us at the time in Kiev. She made the sign of the cross over me and hung a small crucifix on a cold chain around my neck. With shaking hands, she undid the collar of my black jacket, stuck the cross under my shirt, and then turned away and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. 'Off you go!' she said in a faint voice, giving me a gentle push. 'Be a good boy, work hard!'

Mama and I left. I kept looking back at our house as we walked, as if I were being led away for the last time. We were then living on the shady and quiet Nikolsko-Botanicheskaya Street. Massive chestnut trees stood pensively around our house. They had already begun to drop their dry, five-pointed leaves. It was a typical autumn day in Kiev – sunny, very blue and warm – although with cool shadows. Grandmother stood at the window nodding to me until we turned onto Tarasovskaya Street. Mama walked along in silence.

When we reached Nikolaevskaya Square and I caught sight of the yellow school building through the greenery, I burst into tears. I must have realised that my childhood was over, that now I would have to work and that this work would be bitter and long and not at all like those peaceful days I had had at home. I stopped and buried my face in my mother's side, and cried so hard that the pencil case in my satchel bobbed up and down as if it were asking what had happened to its young owner.

Mama removed my hat and dried my tears with a scented handkerchief. 'Stop it,' she said. 'Do you think it's easy for me? But you must.'

You must! No words had ever hit me harder up until then than these two words spoken by Mama. 'You must.'

The older I grew, the more often I heard grown-ups say that this is 'the way you must live'. For a long time I refused to accept this and kept asking these grown-ups: 'Why can't a man live as he wants to and must live only as others want him to?' They always answered that I shouldn't concern myself with things I didn't understand. And Mama even once said to my father: 'This is all the result of that anarchist upbringing you've been giving him.' My father drew me close, pressed my head to his white waistcoat, and said with a smile: 'They don't understand us in this house, Kostik.'

After I had settled down and stopped crying, we entered the school. A wide iron staircase, rubbed to the sheen of lead by so many feet, led upwards towards a terrible din similar to an angry buzzing beehive. 'Don't be frightened. It's only the break,' Mama said to me.

We began to climb the stairs. For the first time, Mama let go of my hand. Two senior boys came rushing down the stairs. They made way for us, and one of them said as we passed: 'They've brought in another miserable little swarmer.'

And so I joined the ranks of the anxious and defenceless preparatory class or, as the older boys called us with disdain, the swarm. They called us by this name since being small and quick, we'd scurry about and get caught up in their feet during the breaks.

Mama and I passed through the white Assembly Hall with its portraits of the emperors. I especially remember Alexander I. He was holding a green tricorn against his thigh. Reddish whiskers bristled on the sides of his feline face. I didn't like him, despite the cavalry-men with plumed hats galloping over the hills behind his back. We passed through the hall to the office of Inspector Bodyansky – a corpulent man whose uniform frock coat was as roomy as a lady's house-coat. Bodyansky laid a pudgy hand on my head and then thought for a long time before saying: 'Work hard or I'll gobble you up!'

Mama forced a smile. Bodyansky summoned the proctor, Kazimir, and ordered him to take me to the preparatory class. Mama gave me a nod, and Kazimir took me by the shoulder and led me down the long corridors. Kazimir squeezed me so tightly it seemed he was afraid that I'd break free and run back to Mama.

Lessons were under way in the classrooms. The corridors were empty and quiet. The silence was particularly striking after the frenzied din during the break. Dust from the commotion still hung in the air, floating in the rays of sunlight from the garden. The century-old garden of the First Kiev Gymnasium was famous, as big as a park, taking up an entire city block. I looked out of the window into the garden and once more felt like crying. The sun shone through the chestnut trees. The dried, pale violet leaves of the poplars stirred in the breeze.

Even then, as a boy, I loved gardens and trees. I never broke off branches or destroyed birds' nests. Perhaps that was because Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna always told me that 'the world is a marvellous wonder and people ought to live and labour in it as if it were one big garden'. Kazimir noticed I was about to start crying and he dug out of the back pocket of his old but clean coat a sticky sweet. Giving it to me, he said in a Polish accent: 'Eat this sweet during the next break.'

I thanked him in a whisper and took the sweet.

The first days of school I always spoke in a whisper and was too afraid to lift my head. Everything overwhelmed me – the bearded teachers in their blue frock coats, the old vaulted ceilings, the echoes down the endless corridors, and, finally, Director Bessmertny – a handsome older man with a golden beard and a brand new frock coat. He was a mild, enlightened man, but for some reason we all felt he was to be feared. Perhaps it was because he sat in a large office, with moulded ceilings, a red rug and a portrait of Surgeon Pirogov.[1] The director rarely left his office. According to the rules of the school, we always stopped to bow when we saw him, whereas the teachers we simply greeted in passing.

Kazimir and I continued to make our way down the echoing corridors. Supervisors patrolled the halls, looking in on the classrooms through glass transoms over the doors. There was 'The Melon', 'The Dolt', 'Snuff' and Platon Fëdorovich, the only one of them we liked. The preparatory class was in the corridor ruled by Platon Fëdorovich, and this saved me in the beginning from many unpleasantnesses. The supervisors were charged with monitoring the comportment of the schoolboys and informing the inspector of the slightest infraction. These warranted a number of punishments – detention for an hour or two 'without dinner' (in other words, being left to sit bored and alone in an empty classroom after lessons), a bad conduct mark or, finally, a call to one's parents to come in for a meeting with the director. We feared this last punishment most of all. There were additional punishments in the upper forms: temporary suspension, expulsion with the right to apply to another school, and the most terrifying – the so-called 'Wolf's ticket': expulsion without the right to continue your education at any secondary school.

I saw only one older boy expelled with a 'Wolf's ticket'. I was in the first form at the time. It was said he had slapped the German teacher, Yagorsky, a rude man with a green face. Yagorsky had called him a blockhead in front of the whole class. The boy demanded that Yagorsky apologise. Yagorsky refused. Then the boy hit him. For this he was expelled with a 'Wolf's ticket'.

The next day the boy returned to school. None of the supervisors could make up their minds about whether or not to stop him. He opened the classroom door, pulled a Browning out of his pocket, and pointed it at Yagorsky. Yagorsky leapt up from behind his desk and, shielding himself with his class record book, ran between the desks to hide behind the pupils' backs. 'Coward!' cried the boy, upon which he turned, walked out onto the landing, and shot himself through the heart.

The door to our classroom opened onto the landing. We heard a sharp crash and the rattle of glass. Something fell and rolled down the stairs. Our form master threw himself towards the door, and we all

ran after him. The freckle-faced boy lay on the stairs. He lifted a hand up and grabbed at the bannister, then his fingers went limp and he fell still. His eyes, filled with amused surprise, gazed up at us. The supervisors bustled around the boy. Then Director Bessmertny hurried up. He knelt down next to him and opened the boy's jacket, and then we saw the blood on his shirt. Medical orderlies from the first-aid service in their brown uniforms and French caps came running up the stairs and quickly placed the boy on a stretcher.

'Get the boys out of here, now!' the director instructed our form master. But apparently, he didn't hear him, and none of us moved. Yagorsky came out of the classroom and made for the teacher's common room, slouching and his head down. As he walked, the director called after him: 'Get out!'

Yagorsky turned round.

'Get out of my school!' the director told him in a low voice. Yagorsky ran off, cowering, down the corridor.

The next day Mama didn't want me to go to school, but then changed her mind, and I went. Our teachers released us after the second period. They told us that those boys who wanted could attend our schoolmate's funeral. We all went – small and frightened in our long overcoats with our stiff satchels hanging from our shoulders. The day was cold and foggy. The whole school followed the coffin. There were lots of flowers in it. The director led a grey, poorly dressed woman by the arm – the boy's mother. At the time I still had little understanding of such significant moments, yet somehow I understood that life had given us our first lesson in comradeship. One by one we approached the grave and tossed in a handful of earth, as if we were swearing to always be kind and fair to each other.

•

But this was all much later, and for now Kazimir led me to the preparatory class. Behind his desk sat Nazarenko, the form master – a man with a loud voice and a wavy blue beard like some ancient Assyrian ruler, a King Sennacherib or Harharu. The older boys swore he worked for the Okhranka and so they called him He-Hear-You.[2]

All that year, until we moved up to the first form, Nazarenko tormented us little ones with his bellowing voice and taunts, with bad marks and stories about how he had had his ingrown toenails cut out. I feared and hated him. I hated him mostly for these stories about his toenails. I took my seat at a low desk, its top heavily scarred by a penknife. I found it hard to breathe. Our ink reeked of acid. Nazarenko was dictating: 'One day the swan, the crayfish and the pike . . .' Outside the open window a sparrow with a dry maple leaf in its beak perched on a branch. I wished to trade my fate with the sparrow's. It looked at us through the window, let out a plaintive squeak, and dropped the leaf.

'New boy!' he roared. 'Get out your exercise book, start writing and stop looking round, if you don't want to go without dinner!'

I got out my exercise book and started to write. A tear dropped onto my blotter. Then my neighbour, a dark-haired boy with bright eyes, Emmanuel (known as Emma) Shmukler, whispered: 'Swallow your spit, you'll feel better.'

I swallowed my spit but felt no better. For a long while I couldn't even draw a deep breath. So began my first year of school: dust, racing to class during the breaks, the constant fear of being called to the blackboard, ink-stained hands, my heavy satchel, and, like the echoes of a former life, the melodious ringing of the Kiev trams outside the windows, the far-off wheeze of the street organ, and the hoots of the locomotives from the station. From there the big trains raced off in clouds of steam on their way through woods and fields of stubble, while we, bent over our desks, choked on chalk dust wiped from the blackboard with a dry sponge.

Our classroom was connected to the physics laboratory by way of a narrow door. We often looked inside during breaks. It was arranged in the shape of an amphitheatre with benches that rose almost to the ceiling. The older boys were led to the laboratory for their lessons. We, quite naturally, swarmed under their feet in the corridor and they must have got tired of this. Once one of the older boys, a tall, pale fellow, let out a long whistle. Immediately, they began to grab us swarmers one by one and drag us into the physics laboratory. They took their places on benches, holdings us firmly between their knees. At first we liked this. We gazed with curiosity at the mysterious instruments on the shelves – black discs, retorts and brass spheres. Then the first bell rang in the corridor. We tried to break free, but the older boys wouldn't let us go. They held us tightly, and those who struggled the most to escape received the dreaded 'pear'. It really hurt.

There was a second, ominous ringing of the bell. We tried even harder to get away, struggling with all our might, pleading and crying, but the older boys did not yield. The pale boy stood by the door. His classmates yelled at him: 'Make sure you time it just right!' We didn't know what was happening. We

howled with fear. At any moment the bell would ring a third time. Nazarenko would burst into our empty classroom. His rage would be terrifying. Rivers of our tears would not calm it. The third bell. We let out a horrendous roar. The pale boy raised his arm. This was the signal that the physics teacher had entered the far end of the corridor. He walked unhurriedly, cautiously, listening to the screams emanating from the physics laboratory.

The physics teacher was very fat. He had to turn sideways to squeeze through the narrow door. The older boys' prank was built upon this very fact. As soon as the teacher had wedged himself into the doorway, the pale youth dropped his arm. We were let go and now, in our crazed state, rushed blindly with tears streaming down our faces out of the physics laboratory towards our classroom. We crashed like a wave into the frightened teacher. For a moment, an agitated whirlpool of boys' cropped heads swirled at the door. And then we ejected the teacher out of the door and into the corridor like a popped cork, pushed our way through his legs, and tore into our classroom. Fortunately, Nazarenko had been detained in the teachers' room and did not notice a thing.

The older boys managed to pull off this treacherous trick only once. After that, we were more careful. From then on when they came out into the corridor, we immediately hid in our room, closed the door, and barricaded the entrance with our desks. This little game, which had cost us so many tears, had been the idea of the pale youth. His name was Bagrov.[3] A few years later he fired a revolver at the tsar's minister Stolypin at the Kiev Opera House, killing him, for which he was hanged. At his trial, Bagrov displayed calm indifference. When the sentence was read, he said: 'I don't care in the least whether I live to eat another two thousand steaks or not.'

There was a lot of talk among the grown-ups about whether or not Bagrov had really been a revolutionary or in fact an agent of the Okhranka who'd organised the murder of Stolypin in order to please the tsar (Nicholas hated Stolypin because he'd been unable to resist his minister's superior will). My father always insisted that no man capable of pronouncing such cynical words while facing death as had Bagrov could ever be a revolutionary.

[1] Nikolai Pirogov (1810–81), pioneering physician and surgeon.

[2] The Department for Protecting Public Security and Order, the tsarist secret police, known by the acronym Okhranka or Okhrana.

[3] Dmitry Bagrov (1887–1911), anarchist revolutionary as well as under-cover agent for the Okhranka, hanged for the assassination of Prime Minister Pëtr Stolypin.

14

Water from the Limpopo

On the table in our classroom stood a row of sealed bottles filled with yellowish water. Every bottle had a label on it. An old, uneven hand had written on the labels: 'Water from the Nile', 'Water from the River Limpopo', 'Water from the Mediterranean'.

There were many bottles. They held water from the Volga, the Rhine and the Thames, the Dead Sea, the Amazon and Lake Michigan. No matter how long we stared at the bottles, all the water looked equally yellow and boring. We pestered our geography teacher, Cherpunov, to allow us to taste the water from the Dead Sea. We wanted to find out if it really was that salty. But Cherpunov never allowed us to. Small, with a long grey beard practically down to his knees, and slits for eyes, Cherpunov looked like a wizard. It was with good reason his nickname was Chernomor after the evil sorcerer from Pushkin's *Ruslan and Ludmila*. Cherpunov was always bringing curious objects with him to class. Most of all he loved bringing bottles of water. He told us how he himself had collected the water from the Nile near Cairo.

'Look how much sediment there is,' he said, shaking the bottle. 'This sediment from the Nile is worth more than diamonds. The culture of Egypt was built on this mud. Markovsky, tell the class what we mean by the word "culture".'

Markovsky stood up and said that culture was the cultivation of cereals, raisins and rice.

'Stupid, but there's a bit of truth in that!' commented Cherpunov and began showing us the various bottles. He was particularly proud of the water from the river Limpopo. A former pupil had sent it to him as a gift. Cherpunov devised special visual aids to help us remember all sorts of geographical facts. Once he drew a large 'A' on the blackboard. In the right-hand corner of this 'A' he wrote a second, smaller 'A' and then a third still smaller one in it, and in the third, a fourth. And then he said: 'Now remember: A is for Asia, Arabia is in Asia, Aden is in Arabia, and in Aden there sits an Anglo-Saxon.'

We memorised this immediately and never forgot it for the rest of our lives.

The older schoolboys told us that Cherpunov had put together a small geographical museum in his flat, but the old man would not let anyone see it. It was said to include a stuffed hummingbird, a butterfly collection, a telescope and even a nugget of gold. Upon hearing this, I began to organise my own museum. It was, of course, rather modest, but, in my imagination, it amounted to a realm of astonishing things. Each object had its own colourful story behind it – be it a button from the uniform of a Romanian soldier or a dead praying mantis.

Once I came upon Cherpunov in the Botanical Gardens. He was sitting on a bench still wet from the rain and poking the ground with his walking stick. I doffed my cap and bowed.

'Come here!' Cherpunov said, holding out a fat hand. 'Have a seat. Tell me, what's this I hear about you organising a small museum? What sort of things do you have in it?'

I shyly gave him a list of my simple treasures. Cherpunov smiled. 'Most commendable!' he said. 'Come and visit me on Sunday morning. You can have a look at my museum. I don't doubt that if you devote yourself to such matters you'll become a geographer or explorer one day.'

'With my mother?' I asked.

'Your mother?

'Should I come with my mother?'

'No, why? Come by yourself. Mothers don't understand the first thing about geography.'

On Sunday morning I put on my new school uniform and went to call on Cherpunov. He lived in the Pechersk neighbourhood in a low outbuilding located deep inside a courtyard. The building was so overgrown with lilac bushes that all the rooms were dark. It was late autumn, but the lilacs, wet with mist, were still green. Down below on the Dnieper the steamers hooted as they departed Kiev to winter in the south. I climbed the front steps and saw next to the door a brass plate and round doorbell knob. I pulled on the knob. I could hear the tinkle of bells inside. Cherpunov opened the door. He was wearing a thick grey jacket and felt shoes.

The miracles began right there in the front hall. Reflected in an oval mirror was a small schoolboy, red with embarrassment, struggling with stiff fingers to undo the buttons on his coat. It took me some time

before I realised that it was my own reflection. Still struggling with the buttons, I noticed the mirror's frame. It wasn't a frame, but a wreath of delicately painted glass leaves, flowers and bunches of grapes.

'That's Venetian glass,' said Cherpunov, helping me with the last of my buttons, then taking my coat and hanging it up. 'Take a close look. You can even touch it.'

I carefully touched a glass rose. The glass was opaque, as if it had been dusted with powder, but a shaft of light from the next room shone through it with a reddish glow. 'It's just like Turkish delight,' I said.

'Stupid, but there's a bit of truth in that,' Cherpunov mumbled.

I blushed such that even my eyes seemed to turn red. Cherpunov patted me on the shoulder. 'Don't be offended. It's just a saying of mine. Come. We'll have tea together.'

I hesitated, but Cherpunov took me by the elbow and led me into the dining room. It was more of a garden than a room. To get to my place at the table I had to carefully move aside the leaves of a philodendron and some branches with fragrant red cones dangling from the ceiling. The fronds of a palm tree hung over the white tablecloth. Vases of pink, yellow and white flowers crowded the windowsills.

I took a seat at the table, but immediately jumped up again. A petite young woman with brilliant grey eyes had come rushing into the room, her dress swishing as she walked.

'Masha, this is the schoolboy I told you about,' said Cherpunov, nodding at me. 'Georgy Maximovich's son. He's embarrassed, quite naturally.'

The woman held her hand out to me. Her bracelet tinkled. 'Are you really going to show him everything, Pëtr Petrovich?' she asked, smiling as she scrutinised me.

'Yes, after we've had our tea.'

'Then I'll use that time to walk into town. I want to go to Kirchheim's pastry shop for a thing or two.'

'As you wish.'

The woman poured me a cup of tea with lemon and pushed a plate of Vienna rolls in front of me. 'You'll need to build up your strength before the lecture,' she said.

After tea Cherpunov lit a cigarette. He flicked the ash into a sea-shell edged with petrified foam of the most delicate pink colour. An exact duplicate of the shell stood next to it on the table. 'This shell is from New Guinea,' Cherpunov explained.

'All right then, goodbye!' the young woman said loudly, getting up and leaving.

'Well now,' said Cherpunov, following her out with his eyes before pointing to a portrait on the wall. It depicted a bearded man with an emaciated face. 'Do you know who that is? One of Russia's finest men. The explorer Miklukho-Maklai.[1] He was a great humanist. I don't suppose you know what that word means, but that doesn't matter. You will in time. He was a great scholar who believed in humanity's essential goodness. He lived all by himself, unarmed and dying of fever, among the cannibals of New Guinea. Yet he managed to do so much good for the savages and he showed them so much patience and kindness that when our corvette the *Emerald* came to bring him back to Russia, crowds came out to the beach in tears, reaching out their arms to the ship as they cried: "Maklai! Maklai!" And so, remember: with kindness you can achieve anything and everything.'

The woman returned to the dining room and stopped by the doors. She was wearing a small black hat and was pulling a glove onto her left hand.

'By the way, what is poetry?' Cherpunov asked out of the blue. 'Please don't even try to give me an answer. There isn't one. Take this shell from the island where Maklai lived. If you were to stare at it for a long time, suddenly it would come to you that one morning long ago the sun landed on this shell and it will remain on it forever.'

The woman sat down on a chair by the door and began to take off her glove. I stared at the shell. For a moment I truly believed that I had fallen asleep and was seeing the slow dawn and the pink flash of the sun's rays over the great translucent expanse of the ocean waters.

'If you press the shell to your ear,' Cherpunov said from somewhere far away, 'you'll hear a rumbling sound. I can't tell you why this is. In fact, no one can. It's a mystery. Everything that we're unable to understand we call a mystery.'

The woman took off her hat and laid it on her lap.

'Here, listen,' said Cherpunov.

I pressed the shell to my hear and heard a sleepy murmur – as if a gentle surf were breaking on some shore far, far away.

The woman held out her hand: 'Let me try. It's been a long time since I listened to it.'

I gave her the shell. She pressed it to her ear, smiled and opened her mouth just enough for me to see her teeth. They were small, very white and wet.

'Aren't you going to Kirchheim's, Masha?' Cherpunov asked.

The woman got up. ‘I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to go all by myself. Excuse me if I’ve disturbed you.’ She left the dining room.

‘Well, all right then, let’s continue our conversation, young man,’ said Cherpunov. ‘There are some black boxes over there in the corner. Fetch the top one, but do be careful about it.’

I got the box and placed it on the table in front of Cherpunov. The box turned out to be quite light. Cherpunov slowly removed the lid. I peeped over his shoulder and let out a shriek. An enormous butterfly, bigger than a maple leaf, was lying in the box on a piece of dark silk and shimmering like a rainbow.

‘No, that’s not how you’re supposed to look at it!’ he said crossly. ‘Like this!’ He took me by the crown of my head and began to turn it to the right and then the left. Each time the butterfly erupted with colour – white, then gold, then purple, then blue. It was as if its wings were being burned by a miraculous fire that would never go out.

‘A most rare butterfly from the island of Borneo!’ Cherpunov announced with pride and then replaced the lid.

Next Cherpunov showed me an astral globe, old maps with different roses of the winds on them, and a few stuffed hummingbirds with long beaks like awls.

‘Well, that’s enough for today,’ he said. ‘You’re tired. You can come visit me any Sunday you like.’

‘Are you always at home?’

‘Yes, I’m too old now to travel the world, my friend. And so now I wander about here in my rooms, exploring the things on my tables and walls.’ He waved a hand at the bookshelves and the dead hummingbirds.

‘Did you do a lot of travelling?’ I asked timidly.

‘No less than Miklukho-Maklai.’

The young woman came in as I was hurriedly trying to put on my coat and having trouble finding my sleeve. She was in a short, close-fitting jacket, hat and gloves. A small dark veil covered her eyes, making them appear dark blue. ‘Where do you live?’ she asked.

I told her.

‘So, we are going the same direction as far as Kreshchatik. Shall we?’

We left. Cherpunov stood in the doorway and watched us go. Then he said in a loud voice: ‘Masha, please do be careful. And hurry back.’

‘All right,’ the woman replied, without bothering to turn round.

We passed the Nikolsky Fort with its bronze lion heads on its gates, walked through Mariinsky Park, where I had earlier met the midshipman, and turned onto Institutskaya Street. The woman was silent. So was I. I was afraid she would ask me something and I would have to answer. On Institutskaya Street, she finally did ask me something: ‘What did you like the most at our museum?’

‘The butterfly,’ I said, before pausing and adding: ‘Although I feel bad for it.’

‘Really?’ she said, surprised. ‘Why do you feel bad?’ She addressed me with ‘*vy*’, the formal ‘you’, which no one had ever done before. This made me all the more nervous.

‘It’s so beautiful, but almost no one gets to see it,’ I answered.

‘What else did you like?’

On Kreshchatik we stopped in front of Kirchheim’s. The woman asked: ‘Are you allowed to visit pastry shops for cocoa and sweets?’

I didn’t even know whether or not I was allowed, but I did recall that once Galya and I had been with Mama to Kirchheim’s, and we had indeed drunk cocoa on that occasion. So, I said that yes, of course, I was allowed to treat myself at Kirchheim’s.

‘Wonderful! Let’s go.’

We took a seat in the back. The woman moved a vase of hydrangeas off to the side of the table and ordered two cups of cocoa and a small cake.

‘What form are you in at school?’

‘The second.’

‘And how old are you?’

‘Twelve.’

‘I’m twenty-eight. At twelve you can believe anything.’

‘What?’ I interrupted.

‘Do you enjoy playing games and making things up?’

‘Yes.’

‘So does Pëtr Petrovich. But I don’t, unfortunately. Maybe you could include me in some of your games. We could have fun together.’

‘What sort of games?’ I asked, curious. The conversation was getting interesting.

‘What sort? Let’s see. Perhaps Cinderella or trying to escape from an evil king. We could even think up a new game. We could call it “The Butterfly from the Island of Borneo”.’

‘Yes!’ I said, flushed with excitement. ‘We could go to an enchanted forest in search of living water.’

‘At great risk to our lives, of course?’

‘Yes, of course, at great risk.’

‘We would carry this water cupped in our hands,’ she said and lifted her veil. ‘When one of us became tired, the other would carry it. We’d have to pour it back and forth very carefully to make certain we didn’t spill a drop.’

‘But one or two drops would have to spill out and fall to the ground, and there . . .’

‘And there,’ she interrupted, ‘in those spots, large bushes with white flowers will sprout. And then what, what will happen next, do you think?’

‘We shall sprinkle this water on the butterfly, and it will come back to life.’

‘And it will turn into a lovely maiden?’ the woman asked and laughed. ‘Well, it’s time to go. They’re probably waiting for you at home.’

We left. She accompanied me as far as Fundukleevskaya Street. I turned and watched her go. She was crossing Kreshchatik and had turned to look at me too. She smiled and waved. Her hand was small, and she wore a black glove. At home, I didn’t tell a soul, not even Mama, that I had been at Kirchheim’s. Mama couldn’t understand why I had no appetite for dinner. I just sat there, obstinately silent. I kept thinking about that woman, but nothing made any sense. The next day I asked one of the older boys at school who the woman was.

‘You mean you’ve really been to Cherpunov’s?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you saw his museum?’

‘Yes.’

‘Lucky you,’ the boy said. ‘That’s his wife. He’s thirty-five years older than her.’

I didn’t visit Cherpunov the following Sunday since he had been ill and didn’t come to school much of the week. A few days later Mama suddenly asked me over evening tea whether I had seen a young woman during my visit to Cherpunov’s.

‘Yes, I did,’ I said. Then I blushed.

‘Well, so it’s true,’ Mama said turning to my father. ‘They say he was so good to her! She lived like a princess in a golden cage.’

My father said nothing.

‘Kostik,’ Mama said, ‘you’ve had your tea. Go to your room. It’s nearly your bedtime.’

She had sent me off so she could talk to Father about Cherpunov. I didn’t eavesdrop, even though I really wanted to know what had happened. Soon enough I heard all about it at school. His wife had left him and gone off to St Petersburg. The old man was sick with grief and wouldn’t see anyone.

‘Serves Chernomor right,’ said my classmate Littauer. ‘He shouldn’t have taken a young wife!’

His words made us angry. We were all fond of dear old Cherpunov. So we got even at the start of the next lesson. When our French teacher, Sermout, came flying into the classroom, the whole class screamed in one voice: ‘Littauer! Ittauer! Tauer! Auer! Er!’

Then the room fell silent.

Sermout flew into a rage and, failing to understand just what had taken place, as always, yelled: ‘Littauer, get out!’ He then gave Littauer a poor conduct mark.

We never saw Cherpunov again. He didn’t come back to school. A year later I met him on the street. His face was yellow and puffy, and he was dragging himself along with the aid of a heavy cane. He stopped me, asked how I was doing at school, and said: ‘Do you remember the butterfly? The one from the island of Borneo? Well, I don’t have it anymore.’

I was silent. Cherpunov watched me closely.

‘I gave it to the university. Not only that one, but my entire collection of butterflies. Well, all the best. I’m glad we met.’

Cherpunov died not long afterwards. I thought about him and the young woman for a long time. A strange feeling of sadness overcame me when I recalled her veil and how she smiled and waved as she crossed Kreshchatik. Years later when I was in the last form at school, our psychology teacher, while discussing the creative power of the imagination, suddenly asked: ‘Do you remember Cherpunov and his water from various rivers and seas?’

‘Yes, of course, we remember,’ the whole class replied.

‘Well, I can inform you that those bottles were filled with nothing but ordinary city tap water. You

may ask why Cherpunov deceived you. He quite rightly believed that this was a way of stimulating your powers of imagination. Cherpunov placed great value in this. More than once he commented to me that what separates man from beast is the ability to imagine. Imagination created art. It expanded the boundaries of the world and the capacities of our mind and it gave to our lives that special quality we call poetry.'

[1] Nikolai Miklukho-Maklai (1844–88), anthropologist and explorer, lived among and wrote about the people of New Guinea.

15

The First Commandment

Our divinity teacher, Archpriest Tregubov, had a different-coloured cassock for every day of the week. Grey, blue, purple, black, brown, green and, finally, off-white. You could tell what day of the week it was by the colour of his cassock, be it a Tuesday or a Saturday.

The moment he appeared in our third form, Tregubov immediately destroyed our school's age-old traditions in the teaching of divinity. It was customary that pupils in all schools received the highest mark in this subject. This was apparently because divinity teachers were obliged to exhibit love for their fellow man and so tried not to inflict suffering on us schoolchildren. Or perhaps it was because neither the divinity teachers nor the schoolchildren took the subject seriously.

With one fell swoop Tregubov destroyed our contempt for divinity. 'Altukhov,' he said, 'recite the First Commandment.'

'I am the Lord thy God thou shalt have no other gods before Me!' Altukhov rattled off and grinned. There was no way one could find fault with this answer.

'Sit down!' said Tregubov and then gave Altukhov a zero. 'Borimovich, it's your turn to recite the First Commandment.'

The colour draining from his face, Borimovich recited the First Commandment just as correctly as Altukhov and also got a zero.

Tregubov called on all of us in alphabetical order. All of us recited it correctly, and Tregubov, smiling with malicious delight, gave every last one of us a zero. None of us understood what was happening. It foretold great troubles.

Having completed recording our marks in his grade book – every single surname, starting with 'A' and ending with 'Z' – Tregubov stroked his beard with his perfumed hands and pronounced: 'All of you show a complete lack of respect for punctuation. Thus, you have been fittingly penalised. Your attitude to Holy Scripture is both slipshod and thoughtless, as if you were nothing but a lot of little kittens. After the words "I am the Lord thy God", there is a comma. And why? Because you must make a slight pause here in order to highlight the importance of the following affirmation. And yet all of you race through these holy words as if you were shelling peas. You should be ashamed of yourselves!'

He spoke softly, his narrow eyes full of disdain for us. A gold academician's badge glistened on his silk cassock.

Before Tregubov our divinity master had been Archpriest Zlatoverkhovnikov, a feeble and deaf old man who spoke with a lisp. Things had been easier with him. You could spout any old nonsense as long as you spoke quickly and in a monotone voice. Within a minute or two Zlatoverkhovnikov's eyelids would begin to droop and soon after he'd be fast asleep. Then we were free to do whatever we wanted, just as long as we didn't wake the old priest. The boys at the back played chemin-de-fer and fried small fish on matchsticks. Those up front read *The Adventures of the Famous American Detective Nick Carter*. Zlatoverkhovnikov snored softly, and we boys had our fun until a few minutes before the bell rang and it was time for us to wake him up by dropping all our books on the floor or sneezing in unison on the count of three.

After the old priest, Tregubov appeared before us like an avenging Lord of Hosts. He even looked something like the Lord of Hosts peering down from the church dome – enormous, with a bushy beard and wrathful eyebrows. Not only were we pupils afraid of Tregubov, so, too, were the teachers. He was a monarchist, a member of the State Council, and the enemy of free thought. Equal in rank to the Metropolitan of Kiev, he induced fits of silent terror in the country priests forced to come before him for a dressing down over their various infractions. Tregubov loved to speak at the public discussions about philosophical and religious matters that were then all the rage. He spoke with smooth, sugary eloquence and gave off the smell of eau-de-Cologne.

Our hatred of him was as cold as his for us. But to this very day we still remember the holy scripture he taught us. We used any pretext to miss his lessons. A reliable refuge on such occasions could be found by attending the lessons in Roman Catholic theology. These were taught at the same time, but in a different classroom. It was only there that we felt safe. This territory belonged, in a sense, to the Roman

Catholic Church and Pope Leo XIII. Tregubov's authority went no further than the threshold of his dusty, unexceptional classroom, while in here, Father Olendsky was in charge. Tall, stout, with white hair and a black rosary on his wrist, he was never in the least surprised by the appearance at his classroom door of some embarrassed Russian Orthodox pupil.

'Run away, have you?' he would ask in a stern voice.

'No, Father, it's just that I wanted to sit in your room for a while.'

'Sit for a while, eh? Well, you naughty little boy,' Olendsky shook with laughter. 'Come here.'

The boy approached Olendsky. The priest gave him a loud whack on the head with his snuff box. This gesture signalled the absolution of all sins.

'Sit down,' Olendsky told the boy, 'over there in the corner, behind Khorzhevsky,' (Khorzhevsky was an extremely tall Pole) 'so no one can see you from the corridor and drag you off into the fires of Gehenna. Here, sit and read this newspaper!' Olendsky pulled from the pocket of his soutane a copy of *Kievan Thought* folded in four and handed it to the fugitive.

'Thank you, Father,' the fugitive said.

'Don't thank me, thank God,' replied Olendsky. 'I am nothing more than a pitiful tool in His hands. He has delivered you from the House of Bondage like the Jews from the land of Egypt.'

Of course, Tregubov knew that Olendsky was hiding us in his classroom. But even Tregubov was defenceless before Olendsky. Whenever they met, the good-natured priest became exquisitely polite and venomous. The dignity attached to the position of arch-priest of the Orthodox Church prevented Tregubov from arguing with Olendsky. We made as much use of this fact as possible. In the end, we knew the Catholic liturgy better than many of the Poles.

'Staniszewski, Tadeusz,' said the priest, 'recite the Magnificat.'

Tadeusz Staniszewski stood up, straightened his belt, coughed, swallowed hard, looked out of the window, then at the ceiling, and, finally, confessed: 'I've forgotten it, Father.'

'Forgotten? But you never forget to come to church when Panna Gzhibovskaya is there, do you? Sit down! Who knows the Magnificat? Well? Anyone? Oh, Blessed Virgin of the Virgins, Queen of the Apostles! How is this possible? You're all silent! Everyone who knows the Magnificat raise your hand.'

The Poles never raised their hands. But once in a while one of the Orthodox boys did, one of those miserable fugitives from Tregubov.

'All right, then,' said an exasperated Olendsky, 'you recite the Magnificat! And should God not punish all of you,' and here Olendsky pointed at the Poles, 'then it will be due only to His great mercy.'

Then the fugitive stood up and recited the Magnificat without a single mistake.

'Come here!' said Olendsky.

The fugitive approached. Olendsky removed from the pocket of his soutane a large handful of sweets that looked like coffee beans and gave them to the boy. Next, Olendsky snorted a pinch of snuff, quickly recovered himself, and began to tell us his favourite story about how he had held a requiem Mass for Chopin's heart after it had been returned to Warsaw soldered in a silver urn. After school, Olendsky walked back to his rectory. Along the way he always stopped children on the street and ruffled their hair as they passed by. Everyone in Kiev knew him – the tall priest with the smiling eyes.

For us children, divinity lessons and church matters in general were a constant source of torment. The only thing we enjoyed was Lent. We had a whole week off to fast and attend services before confessing our sins and receiving the Eucharist. We always chose one of the suburban churches. The priests there didn't pay close attention to whether the schoolboys bothered to attend all the necessary Lenten services.

Lent almost always included the grey and misty month of March. The snow had already begun to turn dark and dirty. And with each passing day, more and more patches of blue sky signalling the arrival of spring could be seen in the gaps between the clouds. Jackdaws cawed in the naked poplars. Greyish pools of cold water formed on the melting ice of the Dnieper, and in the markets they were already selling pussy willows covered with furry little catkins.

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We dreamed of finding some way of getting under Tregubov's skin, but he was invulnerable. Only once were we able to avenge ourselves for all the torments and fears he had inflicted on us. And our revenge was merciless.

When we were in the fourth form, we heard from some of the older boys that Tregubov was afraid of rats. We smuggled in a small grey rat and released it beneath our desks while Tregubov was telling us some story from the New Testament. Zhdanovich squealed and jumped up onto his desk.

'What's going on?' Tregubov asked in a threatening voice.

'A rat, Father!' said Zhdanovich, trembling.

We all jumped up. The terrified rat was running around Tregubov's feet. With remarkable grace, Tregubov hopped onto his chair and lifted his cassock up to his knees. We saw that he was wearing striped trousers and slippers with delicate trim on them. We started throwing our textbooks at the rat. It squeaked and darted off in the direction of the blackboard. Father Tregubov quickly moved from his chair to his desk.

'Open the doors!' he roared in his canonical bass voice. 'The doors! Let it out into the corridor!'

We pretended that we were too frightened to go and open the doors. Then Father Tregubov screamed so loud that the glass shook in its frame: 'Platon Fëdorovich! Over here!' And then he flung his mark book at the rat.

The door flew open and there stood the alarmed Supervisor Platon Fëdorovich. Proctor Kazimir was there as well, looking over Platon's shoulder. Finally, Inspector Bodyansky showed up. Frowning so as not to laugh, he took command and began organising the expulsion of the rat. Tregubov refused to climb down from his desk. He merely lowered his cassock, standing there before us like a monument to himself, twice life-size. Once the rat had been expelled, Tregubov, aided by Bodyansky, climbed down from the desk. One of the boys obligingly handed him his mark book, and Father Tregubov, having by now regained his usual sublime appearance, removed himself from the classroom. Only some time later did Tregubov realise that the rat could not have ended up in the classroom by pure chance. He demanded an investigation into the matter, but it led nowhere. The entire school rejoiced, but Inspector Bodyansky said: 'Don't gloat over human weakness! Better you take a close look at yourselves, for I have recently begun to notice once again that some of you, gentlemen, have been going about with broken insignia in your caps. And for this I'm prepared to deprive any boy of his dinner.'

I am forced to jump ahead in my story in order to describe how we got rid of Tregubov. It was in the eighth form and I was then living alone, without any family, in a room on Diky Lane that I rented from an infantry lieutenant by the name of Romuald Kozlovsky. He lived with his mother, Pani Kozlovskaya, a quiet and kind old woman. It was the autumn of 1910 – dank and dreary, pewter skies, and tree branches sheathed in ice. Long-dead leaves that refused to fall rattled in the cold wind. On days like this I often had headaches. I didn't go to school but stayed in my little room on Diky Lane, lying in bed with my head wrapped, and trying not to groan for fear of disturbing Pani Kozlovskaya.

Gradually I warmed up, and the pain subsided. Remaining in bed, I would read one of the yellow paperbacks from the Universal Library. The fire crackled in the stove. All was quiet in the small flat. Now and then a bit of snow blew past the window. The pain now gone, my head felt especially clear and I was surrounded by beauty – the colour of the blue-grey sky, the faint smell of burning wood, and the snow on the windowpane. It was on such a day that Pani Kozlovskaya opened the door to the ring of the postman, took the newspaper, gasped and hurried into my room.

'Kostik,' she said, 'something terrible's happened to Count Tolstoy!'

I jumped out of bed, grabbed the newspaper, which smelled of paraffin, and began to read the first telegrams about Tolstoy's flight. A terrified Pani Kozlovskaya stared at me and kept repeating: 'Dear Lord, save him! Save him, dear Lord!'

I got dressed in a hurry, pulled on my coat and went out. I thought that everything in the city must have changed in an instant with the arrival of this staggering news, but everything appeared to be normal. Trucks carried firewood through the streets, an old Kiev tram clattered by, children were out walking with their governesses. Unable to stay away, I headed off to school.

Newspapers littered the desks. Our form master – the Latin teacher Suboch – was late to class. He was never late to class. He came in, collapsed in his chair, removed his pince-nez, and sat hunched for a long time staring out of the window with his bulging, short-sighted eyes. It was as if he was waiting for something. Finally, he said to me: 'Dear boy, go to the offices of *Kievan Thought*. They're posting the latest telegrams there. Find out what's happening. We'll wait for you.'

Nothing of the sort had ever happened in our class before, but now everyone looked upon it as something quite normal. I got up and left. Platon Fëdorovich intercepted me in the corridor. 'Where are you going?' he threatened and blocked my path.

I told him. Platon Fëdorovich bowed his head and promptly stepped aside to allow me to pass. Upon returning I paused to look into the classroom through the door's upper pane before going in. Suboch was reading aloud. No one was moving, as if they were frozen in place. I quietly opened the door and heard a familiar passage from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

Somehow, we managed to muddle through our lessons for the next two or three days. Then, on another dank morning, I left my room to find special editions of the newspapers with black borders on the front page, bewildered people on the streets, and crowds of students near the university. They were just standing there, not saying a word. Everyone had a black crêpe armband on their coat sleeve. Some

student I didn't know came up to me and fixed an armband to my coat.

I made my way to school. Mounted Cossack patrols rode up and down the streets. Large groups of policemen had gathered in the courtyards. Along the way I met up with some of my classmates – all of them were wearing black armbands like mine. We took them off in the cloakroom and put them on our jackets. The school was unusually quiet. Even the first-year boys kept the noise down. That day our first lesson was divinity. Tregubov entered quickly, much quicker than normal, crossed himself before the icon, and sat down at his desk. Matusevich, the pupil on duty for the day, got up and went over to him. Tregubov gave him a weary look but said nothing.

'Yesterday, at six o'clock in the morning, at Astapovo railway station,' said Matusevich, trying to remain calm and speak loudly, 'the greatest writer of our country, and perhaps of the entire world, Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy, died.'

The desk lids slammed. The whole class stood up. In the profound silence could be heard the clatter of horses' hooves as a patrol rode past. Tregubov leaned forward over his desk, squeezed its edges tightly with his fat fingers, and sat motionless.

'Stand up, Father!' Matusevich said in a soft voice.

Tregubov slowly and heavily rose to his feet. His neck was crimson. He stood there with his eyes lowered. A few minutes passed. To us it seemed like hours. Then we all slowly and quietly took our seats. Tregubov picked up his mark book and walked out of the classroom. He stopped at the doors, turned, and said: 'You have forced me to honour the memory of an apostate who was excommunicated by the church. We won't discuss whether or not he was a great writer. I have committed a crime against my office and will have to answer for it before God and my superiors. Nevertheless, from this day forward I am no longer your teacher. Farewell. And may God grant you wisdom.'

We were silent. Tregubov walked out. The next day a new divinity teacher arrived. Tregubov's replacement was a young priest, a lover of philosophy and literature with a face like the poet Nadson. We fell in love with him immediately for his discretion, charm and youth, and our warm feelings for him remained until it was time for us to leave school.

16

Lime Blossoms

I had never seen such ancient lime trees. At night their crowns were lost in the stars. When the wind blew, the stars seemed to dart here and there among the branches, like fireflies. In the daytime it was dark under the limes, while overhead, in the fresh green leaves, a world of birds of each and every sort squawked, fought, whistled and fluttered from branch to branch.

'Just wait,' Uncle Kolya liked to say. 'Soon the lime trees will blossom, and then . . .'

He never did say what would happen when the lime trees blossomed, but we already knew ourselves that then the old park at Rëvny would be transformed into a place of wonders, of the kind which only occur in fairytales. After school had broken up for the summer, the whole family returned to Rëvny for the second time. Even my father had come along during his holiday. The impoverished owner of the estate rented out two or three wooden dachas in the park for the summer. The estate was far from any towns and the railway. Almost no one came during the summer, except for Uncle Kolya and us. In order to picture the beauty of the place, one must describe it in topographical precision.

A forgotten park of lime trees, wild with hazel and buckthorn. Mossy benches lost amid lilac bushes. Overgrown allées with names like the Temple of Diana, the Path of Sighs and the Nightingale Ravine. Sunny glades with solitary pines and wild flowers, and then another canopy of mighty and, so it seemed, thousand-year-old lime trees. The park sloped down to the river Rëvna. On the other side rose a small hill covered with a dense wood. A single sandy path led down to the river. You could follow it to a crumbling old chapel, which contained an icon of Tikhon Zadonsky. A bit farther on the path petered out in some dry grass.

No one dared to venture farther than the chapel by themselves – not even the bravest of the summer residents, Volodya Rumyantsev, a student of the Petersburg Institute of Forestry. A woody thicket surrounded the timbered chapel; it smelled of mould and ferns. At dusk, owls flew out from its depths. Once at night we heard a distant cry coming from the forest – it was a wandering pedlar who had got lost on his way from the Svensky Monastery to the fair at Trubchevsk. The forest warden found him and brought him to Rëvny. The pedlar, a lean little man with blue eyes, couldn't stop weeping and crossing himself.

One day, we boys, together with Volodya Rumyantsev, took a compass and set off for the woods. We saw bottomless ravines, filled to the brim with brambles and wild hops. Water gurgled far down below, but it was impossible to descend. We discovered in the woods a small stream whose water was so clear it could have been glass. From the steep bank we could see clouds of minnows darting about along the bottom. Eventually we came upon a rotting cross by the stream's source. A tin cup hung from the crosspiece, and a flowering bindweed had grown up and around the cup, holding it in place. We tore away the weed and scooped a cupful of water from the spring. It tasted of rust. Above us cranes rattled, orioles whistled, hawks soared. Clouds with dark blue bottoms floated by over our heads. We gazed at them and thought how well they must be able to take in this land of mysterious forests from up on high. Woodpeckers tapped diligently at dry trunks, and here and there pinecones fell upon our heads.

Volodya Rumyantsev kept insisting that there was an abandoned Old Believers' monastery in the woods. The monastery was now home to nothing but bees, and if you found it, you could take all the honey you ever wanted. We never did find that monastery. We climbed up pine trees to search for the timbered roof with its crooked eight-pointed cross amid the sea of greenery. A cool breeze blew up in the treetops, and our hands stuck to the sappy branches. Black-eyed squirrels jumped about us. The young green pinecones smelled of turpentine. But no matter how much we searched from the tops of the pines, as if from a lighthouse, shading our eyes from the sun with one hand, we never saw a thing other than forest and drifting clouds, which made us dizzy as they floated by.

From the tops of the tall pines the clouds appeared much closer than from the ground. You wanted to reach out and touch these massive, snow-white puffs. High above the clouds, a bright ripple pierced the sky and poured forth rows of transparent plumes. Volodya Rumyantsev said that these were also clouds, but they were so high up they consisted not of water vapour, but ice crystals. The plumes hung motionless in the cold, unattainable height.

Along with the forest, another place of mystery was the river. It twisted beneath overhanging willows, divided into two branches, washed the sides of an island, and in many places was covered by water lilies and flowering rushes that stretched from bank to bank. Wooden dams had been built along the river by the island, where a rundown sawmill stood. Mountains of sawdust had piled up in front of some empty sheds. On hot days the smell of the mill's wood shavings was overpowering. At one time the mill had been powered by a water wheel, but it had long since collapsed and now the wheel and the wooden teeth of its gears were covered in furry cobwebs and yellow mushrooms the colour of sulphur.

Beyond the dams there were deep pools – home to enormous pike – which we called 'the drop-off'. The water here was black and whirled about slowly. My Uncle Kolya and I dropped dozens of hooks and spoon lures into these pools. Along with pike, the waters were home to large, almost dark blue perch. We fished for them from the wet logs of the dam. There were times when the perch tore the rods from our hands and swam off. Our bamboo poles slipped quickly into the depths like golden arrows. They usually resurfaced below the drop-off, and we would retrieve them, together with two perch, from a boat.

There was also an old house with columns at Rëvny, built, so it was said, by Rastrelli.[1] Swallows nested on the pediment. Radiant light flowed through wavy glass into the empty halls, stairways and corridors. Whenever anyone walked along the enfilade, the furniture creaked and the chandeliers tinkled softly. No one lived in the house. Only on certain family celebrations, such as the name day of Maria (there were two Marias in the family – my mother and Aunt Marusya, Uncle Kolya's wife), was the hall with the musicians' gallery opened up and aired in preparation for a ball.

We hung round lanterns from the balcony and set off fireworks in the park late in the evening. The rockets shot up through the dense foliage and released their coloured balls of fire, illuminating the old house in flickering reddish flames as they slowly began to fall. Once the balls went out, the summer night returned to the park, with its distant croaking of frogs, glittering stars and smell of blossoming lime trees. Comrades of my uncle – fellow artillery officers – came to the name day celebrations from Bryansk. Once even the Moscow tenor Askochensky came and gave a concert in the old ballroom.

'Oh, if only you'd return to me once more,' sang Askochensky, 'to where we were so happy! You'd hear a whisper in the trees and would know 'tis the moaning of my aching heart.'

It seemed to me that this romance had been written about our park. It had heard many declarations of longing and witnessed the pale faces of lovers, along with their tears upon parting. 'When melancholy tones disturb your sleep,' Askochensky sang, leaning against the piano, while Aunt Marusya, quickly brushing back a strand of hair, accompanied him, 'or when the wind moans on a stormy night, know 'tis the sound of my inconsolable weeping.'

Supper at Uncle Kolya's dacha followed the ball. The candles in their round shades crackled with the sound of burning moths. We schoolboys were served wine, just like the grown-ups. We began to feel a bit of Dutch courage. Once, after some wine, we decided that each of us would run right round the park by himself in the dark of the night. To be certain no one cheated, each of us had to leave something on the bench in the Nightingale Ravine. Uncle Kolya promised to check in the morning that everyone had kept his word. The first to go was Aunt Marusya's brother, Pavel Tennov, a student at the Academy of Medicine and Surgery. Lanky, with a snub nose and curly beard, he resembled Chekhov and was known as exceedingly trusting and good. For this reason, everyone played tricks on him.

Pavel was supposed to leave an empty wine bottle on the bench in the Nightingale Ravine. It was my turn next. I dashed off into the tree-lined allée. Dew-covered branches lashed my face. I had the feeling that someone was bounding after me in pursuit. I stopped and listened. Someone was creeping about in the undergrowth. I raced on farther and farther until I came out into a clearing. The moon was coming up. Ahead, covered in impenetrable darkness, lay the Nightingale Ravine, and I threw myself into it as if it were dark water. The river glittered, and from the other side came the doleful cry of a bittern.

I stopped by the bench and could smell the lime tree blossoms. Their scent filled the night air. It was quiet, and I couldn't believe that not far from here, on the brightly lit verandah, happy guests were chatting and laughing. We had agreed in advance to play a trick on Pavel. I grabbed the bottle he had left on the bench and threw it into the river. The bottle twisted as it flew, flashing under the moon. Circular, moonlit ripples widened outward towards the banks. I ran farther along the edge of the ravine. I could smell the damp earth and angelica. Panting, I eventually reached the long lime-tree allée. Ahead, the lights burned brightly.

'Kostik!' I heard Aunt Marusya call nervously. 'Is that you?'

'Yes!' I replied, running up to her.

'What nonsense you all are forever coming up with!' said Aunt Marusya. She was standing in the allée, a light woollen shawl around her shoulders. 'Your mother's very worried. Whose idea was this? Gleb's, I suppose.'

‘No, it wasn’t Gleb’s idea,’ I lied. ‘We came up with it together.’

Aunt Marusya had guessed correctly. Uncle Kolya’s ward, Gleb Afanasiev, a shaggy-haired schoolboy from Bryansk whose inventiveness was inexhaustible, had proposed the idea of this nighttime run through the park. He always had a sly twinkle in his grey eyes. A day did not pass without Gleb coming up with some new idea. And so, no matter what, everyone always blamed Gleb for everything. In the morning Uncle Kolya went to check the items on the bench. The bottle Pavel had left was not there. Everyone started to tease him, saying that he’d got scared and never made it to the ravine, but just threw the bottle down somewhere along the way. But Pavel quickly guessed what was going on and threatened Gleb: ‘Just you wait, you’ll pay for this!’

Gleb was silent and didn’t give me away. That same day Pavel dunked Gleb several times while they were out swimming and then tied Gleb’s trousers into a tight knot and tossed them into the water. Gleb spent a long time undoing the knot with his teeth. He looked ridiculous in his wrinkled, heavily chewed trousers, which was particularly unfortunate given that in one of the dachas at Rëvny lived the Karelins, a mother and her two school-age daughters, from Orël. Lyuba, the elder of the two, spent all her time reading in some hidden corner of the park. Her cheeks were fiery red, and her fair hair was always ruffled. We were constantly finding black ribbons that had fallen from Lyuba’s plaits near the benches where she had been sitting. The younger sister, Sasha, was capricious and sarcastic; Gleb had fallen for her. He could not imagine letting her see him in his rumpled trousers. I felt guilty and asked Mama to iron them. In his newly pressed trousers, Gleb was at once restored to his former casual, confident appearance.

There had been nothing special about our run through the park that night, but I could not forget it for a long time. I recalled the waves of lime tree blossoms brushing my face, the cry of the bittern, and a night seemingly without end, brought to life by the light of the stars and filled with the echoes of happiness. At times that summer I felt that there must be practically no place left on earth for human grief. But soon after the name day celebration I began to have my doubts. I saw a barefoot boy in a ragged peasant’s coat near our dacha. He had come to sell strawberries. He smelled of berries and smoke. He wanted ten kopecks for a jugful of strawberries, but Mama gave him twenty and a piece of pie. The boy stood there staring at the ground and rubbing one bare foot against the other. He tucked the pie inside his shirt and was silent.

‘Whose boy are you?’ Mama asked him

‘Aniska’s,’ he answered shyly.

‘Why aren’t you eating your pie?’

‘It’s for my mum,’ he said, in a hoarse voice, not raising his eyes. ‘She’s not well. She was hauling wood, hurt her belly.’

‘And where’s your father?’

‘He’s dead.’

The boy sniffled, stepped back and took off running. Frightened, he looked back over his shoulder as he ran, clutching his chest to keep from losing his pie. For a long time, I could not forget that tow-headed boy and secretly judged Mama. She had eased her guilty conscience with a piece of pie and twenty kopecks. I understood that very well. I understood that such bitter injustice demands something more than pitiful crumbs. But how to end such injustice, which I encountered ever more frequently in my life, I still did not know.

We often heard my father and Uncle Kolya arguing at teatime. They argued about the future of Russia. Uncle Kolya tried to prove that education was the key to the happiness of the Russian people. My father believed that revolution would bring happiness. Pavel, who called himself a populist, joined in the arguments. Once he was nearly expelled from school for a speech he gave at a students’ meeting. Volodya Rumyantsev kept quiet, but he would tell us boys that neither my father nor Uncle Kolya nor Pavel understood the slightest thing.

‘And do you?’ we asked him.

‘Not in the least!’ a satisfied Volodya answered. ‘And I don’t want to understand. I love Russia – that’s all there is to it!’

Volodya was the brother of my Uncle Kolya’s dearest comrade at the Arsenal in Bryansk, Captain Rumyantsev. Volodya was a bit deaf. He slept in the hayloft and always had pieces of straw stuck to his reddish beard. He disdained all human comforts. Instead of a pillow he slept with his rolled-up student’s jacket under his head. He shuffled when he walked and spoke in a mumble. Under his jacket he wore a faded blue traditional Russian shirt tied with a black silk tasselled cord.

Volodya’s hands were always covered in burns from developing fluids and fixatives – he was passionate about photography. He was an enterprising young man. He signed on with a Moscow

lithography firm, Scherer and Nobholz, and travelled in the summer to remote towns to photograph the local sights, which the lithographers printed as picture postcards and sold on bookstalls at railway stations. We liked Volodya's hobby. He often disappeared from Rëvny for several days, and then returned to say he'd been to Yefremovo, to Yelets, to Lipetsk.

'Now, that's the life, my young fellows!' he'd say, sitting in the *banya*, lathering his head. 'The day before yesterday, I swam across the Oka, yesterday, the Moksha, and today, the Rëvna.'

He infected us with his love for provincial Russia. He knew it inside out – its fairs, monasteries, country estates, customs and traditions. He had visited Lermontov's birthplace in Tarkhany, Fet's country house near Kursk,[2] the horse fair at Lebedyan, the island of Valaam and the battlefield at Kulikovo. Everywhere he went he had elderly female acquaintances – former schoolteachers or minor local officials – who would put him up for the night. They fed him fish pie and cabbage soup, and in return for their hospitality he taught the old ladies' canaries how to whistle a polka or gave them presents of superphosphate – adding it to their geraniums would produce huge scarlet blossoms guaranteed to amaze their neighbours.

He never took part in arguments about the fate of Russia, but always had something to say when the conversation turned towards the subject of Tambov ham, frozen apples from Ryazan or sturgeon from the Volga. On such subjects no one was his equal. Uncle Kolya liked to joke that only Volodya Rumyantsev knew the price of bast shoes in Kineshma and how much a pound of goose down was going for in Kalyazin.

Once Volodya Rumyantsev travelled to Orël and returned with awful news. We were playing croquet by the dacha. We all loved to play. Our games often dragged on after dark when we'd have to bring lamps out onto the lawn. We did not fight over anything as fiercely as over croquet, especially with my brother Borya. He played well and always became the 'rover' very quickly. He'd then start whacking our balls and sent them so far that sometimes we couldn't find them. We were so angry, and when Borya took aim we muttered: 'The Devil in your hand, a toad in your mouth!' There were times this spell worked, and Borya would miss. We also fought with Gleb. When he played against Sasha, he would always muff his shot and lose intentionally in order to make the girl happy. But when he played with Sasha against us, he showed off his miraculous skill and always won. Usually, all the summer residents gathered to play croquet. Even Uncle Kolya's dogs, Mordan and Chetvertak, came running to watch, although they always were careful to lie down behind the pine trees to stay out of the way of the balls.

That morning the croquet lawn was very noisy, as always. Then we heard the sound of rolling wheels. A tarantass drove up to Uncle Kolya's dacha. Someone shouted: 'Volodya Rumyantsev has arrived!' No one paid any attention: we were all used to his constant comings and goings. A minute later Volodya appeared. He walked up in a dusty topcoat and boots and his face was pinched as if he were about to cry. In his hand he held a newspaper.

'What is it?' asked a worried Uncle Kolya.

'Chekhov has died.'

Volodya turned round and returned to the dacha. We ran after him. Uncle Kolya snatched the newspaper from Volodya, read it, tossed it on the table, and walked off to his room. Aunt Marusya followed anxiously behind. Pavel had taken off his pince-nez and rubbed the lenses with his handkerchief for a long time.

'Kostik,' Mama said, 'go down to the river and call Papa. He can stop his fishing for once.'

She said this as if Father could have somehow known already about Chekhov's death, but wasn't saddened by it or even cared given his frivolous nature. I felt bad for my father but went anyway. Gleb Afanasiev came with me. All of a sudden he became quite serious. 'Yes, Kostik!' he said as we walked, and then sighed deeply. I told my father that Chekhov had died. All at once he went pale and slumped over.

'How is it possible?' he said in a confused voice. 'I never thought I'd outlive Chekhov . . .'

We walked back past the croquet lawn. Mallets and balls lay strewn about. The lime trees were full of noisy birds and the sun shone through the branches, making green patches on the grass. I had already read some Chekhov and loved it. I walked and thought that such people as Chekhov ought never to die.

Two days later Volodya Rumyantsev left for Chekhov's funeral in Moscow. We accompanied him to the station at Sinezërki. Volodya was carrying a basket of flowers to lay on Chekhov's grave. They were simple wild flowers. We had picked them in the fields and woods, and Mama had packed them between layers of damp moss and made a cover out of a wet cloth. We tried to pick as many wild flowers as possible because we were certain Chekhov loved them. We picked many King Solomon's seals, pinks, daisies and centauries. Aunt Marusya added some jasmine she had cut in the park.

The train left in the evening. We walked all the way back from Sinezërki and did not arrive at Rëvny

until dawn. A waxing crescent moon hung low over the woods. It had rained earlier, and the moon's tender light shone in the puddles. The smell of wet grass hung in the air. A lone cuckoo was still calling in the park. Once the moon set, out came the stars for a brief moment before being blotted out by the dawn mist. It rustled for a time, trickling off the bushes, until a peaceful sun rose and warmed the earth.

[1] Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli (1700–71), Italian architect chiefly active in Russia; works include the Winter Palace in St Petersburg.

[2] Afanasy Fet (1820–92), influential and beloved lyric poet.

17

Just a Little Boy

Inspector Bodyansky walked briskly into our third-form classroom. He was wearing his new uniform frock coat. The inspector's cunning eyes flashed. We rose to our feet.

'On the occasion of the Imperial Manifesto granting civil liberties to the nation, the school will be closed for three days,' Bodyansky said. 'Congratulations! Now put away your books and go home. And I advise you to stay out of the grown-ups' way for the next few days.'

We raced out of the school. Autumn that year was remarkable. The sun was still hot in October. The trees in the parks glittered with a powdery gold, none of which they let fall on the paths, and shone in all their fiery beauty. We were still going about in our summer coats. Pouring out into the street, we noticed crowds with red flags near one of the large university buildings. They were listening to speeches being delivered from the top of the steps and shouting 'Hurrah!' Hats were being tossed in the air.

We climbed up on the railings of Nikolaevskaya Square and also began to shout 'Hurrah!' and toss our hats in the air. They got stuck in the chestnut trees as they fell. We shook the trees, and the leaves, along with our hats, dropped on us like crackling rain. We laughed with delight. We had already pinned red ribbons to our coats. In the middle of the square stood Nicholas I in blackened bronze, one foot thrust forward, looking from atop his pedestal with arrogant disapproval upon this disorder. The crowd fell silent, the red flags were lowered and we heard solemn voices in song: 'You fell as victims in the fateful struggle . . .'

Everyone began to drop to their knees. We took off our hats as well and sang along with the funeral march, although we didn't know all the words. Then the crowd rose and set off along the railings of the square. I caught sight of my brother Borya in the crowd with our lodger, a Montenegrin student named Marković.

'Go home at once!' my brother said. 'And don't you dare go out again by yourself.'

'Can't I stay with you?' I asked timidly.

'You'll be crushed. Off you go. You can see everything tomorrow.'

I so wanted to march off together with that joyous and triumphant crowd, but Borya had already disappeared. Somewhere far ahead a band struck up 'The Workers' Marseillaise', and I recognised its famous, ringing notes: 'Let us denounce the old world, / Let us shake its dust from our feet!'

I climbed through the railing and joined the crowd. A girl in an astrakhan hat, most likely a university student, reached out her hand to me and we walked on together. I couldn't see a thing in front of me other than the backs of other marchers. People were standing on the rooftops and waving their hats at us. As we were passing the Opera House, I heard the clop of hooves. I climbed up onto the kerb and saw a line of mounted police. They were moving back, making way for the crowd to pass. The fat chief of police made way as well, holding a long salute and smiling condescendingly. I jumped down from the kerb and once more couldn't see a thing. I could tell where we were going only by the shop signs. Now we were descending Fundukleevskaya Street past the Bergonie Theatre, next we were turning onto Kreshchatik and walking past the Kirchheim pastry shop. Then we passed Lyuteranskaya Street and the Idzikovskaya Library.

'Where are we going?' I asked the girl in the astrakhan hat.

'City Hall. There's going to be a meeting. We are now free as birds. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I do,' I replied.

'Where do you live?' she asked all of a sudden.

'On Nikolsko-Botanicheskaya Street.'

'Do your parents know you're here at the demonstration?'

'Everyone's at the demonstration,' I replied, trying to avoid the subject of my parents.

We passed Balabukha's dried-fruit shop and Nikolaevskaya Street and stopped. It was impossible to go any farther. A dense crowd stretched all the way to the city hall. On its roof sparkled the gilded figure of St Michael – the symbol of Kiev. I could see the large balcony now filled with bare-headed people. One of them started to speak, but we couldn't hear a thing. I could only see how the wind ruffled his grey hair. Someone grabbed me by the shoulder. I turned around and saw our Latin teacher, Suboch.

‘Konstantin Paustovsky,’ he said sternly, even though his eyes were laughing. ‘What are you doing here? Go home this instant.’

‘Don’t worry, he’s with me,’ said the girl.

‘I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle, I didn’t know,’ Suboch politely replied.

The crowd moved back and separated us from Suboch. The girl took my hand and we tried to push our way through to the pavement.

‘Calm down, citizens!’ a hoarse voice ordered nearby. The girl and I reached the pavement, and she pulled me to the wall of a yellow building with an arched gateway, which I recognised as the post office. I didn’t understand why she was holding my hand so tightly and pulling me into the gateway. I couldn’t see a thing other than people’s backs and pigeons flying over the crowd. They looked like pieces of paper as they caught the light. A trumpet blared in the distance – *Ta-ta-ta-ta! Ta-ta-ta-ta!* And then all was silent again.

‘Comrade soldiers!’ shouted the same hoarse voice, and then all of a sudden there came a terrible cracking sound, almost as if a heavy sheet had been torn in two. Next, plaster was raining down on us. The pigeons flew off, leaving the sky empty. There came a second crack, and the crowd raced for the sides of the buildings. The girl tugged me into the courtyard, and the last thing I saw on Kreshchatik was the sight of a thin student in an unbuttoned great-coat leaping onto the window ledge of Balabukha’s shop and drawing a black Browning.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked the girl.

‘They’re shooting! The troops are shooting.’

‘Why?’

She didn’t answer. We ran through tangled, narrow courtyards. Behind us we heard screams, gunshots, the pounding of feet. The day suddenly grew dark, shrouded in a yellow smoke. It was hard for me to run with my heavy satchel; the books kept banging against my back. We kept running through courtyards until we came out onto Proreznaya Street and then headed up towards the Golden Gate. Two shiny ambulances raced past. A panting, pale-faced group caught up with us and then kept on running. A Cossack unit galloped down Proreznaya Street, led by an officer wielding a drawn sabre. Someone let out a piercing whistle behind them, but they didn’t stop.

‘My God, what a foul deed!’ the girl kept repeating. ‘It’s a trap! With one hand they give us freedom, while with the other they shoot us down!’

We had run in a large circle and after passing St Vladimir’s Cathedral returned to Nikolaevskaya Square, the very spot where I’d only just hung from the railings, cheered ‘Hurrah!’ and waved my cap.

‘Thank you,’ I said to the girl. ‘I’m not far from home. I can make it on my own.’

She walked off. I leaned against the railing and took off my hat – it hurt and I had a terrible headache. I was frightened. An old man in a bowler walked past and asked what was the matter. I couldn’t even answer. The man shook his head and walked on. I pulled on my hat and headed for home. It was already getting dark. A crimson sunset was reflected in the windows. This was the hour when the street lamps were usually being lit, but now for some reason it wasn’t being done. At the corner of our street I saw Mama. She hurried towards me. She grabbed me by the shoulders and then suddenly screamed: ‘Where’s Borya? Have you seen Borya?’

‘Over there!’ I pointed in the direction of Kreshchatik.

‘Go home!’ Mama said and ran off down the street.

I stood and watched her go, and then went home. Our street was deserted as usual. The lights were on in the windows, and I saw the lamp with the green shade in my father’s study. Liza, our maid, stood next to the open gate. She took my satchel and wiped my face.

‘Such a naughty boy, you’re always running off somewhere!’ she said. ‘It’s enough to drive one crazy. Come along, it’s time for a wash.’

Only Galya and Dima were home. Galya was going from room to room bumping into the furniture and asking over and over: ‘Where is everyone? Where is everyone?’ Dima sat on the windowsill listening to the noises outside. He hadn’t made it to the demonstrations, and he was hoping to catch the sound of gunfire. He thought the windowsill would be the best place. I got cleaned up, and Liza gave me some warm milk. I couldn’t stop shuddering.

‘Did you see any dead bodies?’ Dima asked me.

‘Ugh . . .’ I stuttered, not sure what to say.

‘Leave him alone!’ Liza snapped. ‘Can’t you see the state he’s in?’

Finally, Mama came home with Borya. He was all dirty and had lost his hat. He had a strange smile on his face, as if he’d lost his hearing. Soon after, the student Marković arrived. He told us that he’d seen many dead and wounded. Mama let down the blinds on all the windows and told Liza not to open the

door to anyone without first making sure who it was. Then Mama sent me to bed. Before lying down, I lifted the blind and looked out into the street. The lamps still hadn't been lit. An eerie grey light shone on the rooftops. It was so quiet it seemed as if the city had died. A horseman galloped down the neighbouring street, and then all was quiet again.

I lowered the blind, undressed and got into bed. I gazed at the thick walls and told myself our two-storey house was like a fortress. No bullet could penetrate it. The greenish flame of my lamp crackled. I began to doze off, and then I heard the doorbell and hurried steps, followed by my father's voice. He was pacing back and forth in the dining room, talking incessantly.

The next morning Mama told me that I wasn't to set foot beyond our courtyard. I was so upset by this I decided not to leave the house at all. I threw on my heavy coat and went out onto the balcony to read the Nekrasov poem we'd been given as homework.[1] All I managed to memorise were the first two lines: 'It is late autumn. The rooks have flown. The forest is bare, the fields are empty.' Everything distracted me. A fire brigade drove past. Then Staff Captain Zadorozhny, a Black Hundred[2] and a scoundrel who lived in a wing of the house, came out of his door. He was wearing his grey army greatcoat, a sword belt and a revolver which hung at his side. His wife, tall and thin as an ironing board with dishevelled hair and dark circles under her eyes, followed him out onto the steps. Her black Japanese kimono with embroidered peacocks fluttered about her.

Zadorozhny had recently returned from the Japanese war with two massive trunks stuffed with lengths of silk, kimonos and even a curved Chinese sword. 'The Hero of Mukden!' my father jokingly called Zadorozhny.

'Georges,' his wife whined in an affected voice, 'do keep in mind that I worry.'

'It's nothing, my dear!' Zadorozhny gallantly replied and then kissed her hand. 'We're just going to put an end to this nonsense.' And off he went without a backward glance.

The war with Japan had just ended, and we children were as upset and indignant about it as the grown-ups. We heard their conversations about the incompetence of our High Command, about 'lazybones' Kuropatkin, the treachery of Stessel,[3] the surrender of Port Arthur and the embezzlers in the commissariats. Autocratic Russia had come unravelled like a piece of rotten old cloth. At the same time we heard the grown-ups talk about the courage and great tenacity of the Russian soldier, and about how things could not go on like this any longer, for the people's patience had reached its limit. The worst blow for us had been the loss of the Russian fleet at Tsushima. Once Borya showed me a piece of paper with some faint violet-coloured lines copied on a hectograph. You could barely read it.

'Is it a leaflet?' I asked. I had already read several leaflets pasted on the walls of our school.

'No,' Borya replied, 'it's a poem.'

I could barely make out the beginning:

> Enough, enough, O heroes of Tsushima!
> You fell as the last victims.
> It's close now, it's at the door,
> Liberty for our native land!

Liberty! At the time I still had only a vague notion of what that meant. I imagined it to be like the allegorical painting that hung in Father's study: a wrathful but radiant young woman with a firm bare breast standing atop the barricade. In one hand she held high a red banner and in the other she was lighting a cannon with a smouldering fuse. This was Liberty. Crowding around her were men in blue shirts with rifles in their hands, exhausted but exultant women, little boys, and even a young poet in a tattered top hat, and all of them singing with inspiration what must have been 'La Marseillaise': 'To arms, citizens! Our day of glory has arrived!'

To the beating of drums, the blowing of trumpets, Liberty strode triumphantly across the land, greeted everywhere by the people's riotous cries. Behind Liberty walked a man very similar in appearance to the student Marković – just as swarthy, with burning eyes. In his hand he held a pistol. One day I had looked into Marković's room through the balcony window and saw him cleaning a black steel Browning while humming a tune. Small brass bullets lay on an open medical textbook on his desk. Marković saw me and immediately covered the Browning with a newspaper.

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The next morning Liza removed the icons from the walls and placed them in the windows facing the street. Ignaty, our porter, took some chalk and drew a large cross on our front gates, which he then closed and bolted. We found ourselves in a locked fortress. Mama said a pogrom against the Jews had

broken out in the city. ‘On orders from St Petersburg,’ she added. Liza whispered that looters had descended on Vasilkovskaya Street and the rioting was getting close to us. Marković left with Borya. Marković had first put on his boots and student uniform, held tight with a belt. Mama didn’t want to let Borya go, but Father snapped at her. And so, she made the sign of the cross over Borya, gave him a kiss and let him go. As the two descended the stairs, Mama kept begging Marković to look after him.

‘Where are they going?’ I asked Father.

‘To the Students’ Combat Brigade. To defend the Jews,’ he said.

Father soon followed after Borya and Marković. Dima and I spent all morning playing aimlessly in the yard. Around noon we heard gunshots. The shooting quickly grew more intense. A fire broke out on Vasilkovskaya Street. Charred bits of paper began falling into the yard. Later that day Father brought home an old Jewish woman. She was in a state of confusion, a kerchief slipping off her grey head, and she was holding a speechless boy by the hand. We knew her son, the doctor. Mama went to see Ignaty in the kitchen and gave him ten roubles. But Ignaty gave the money back to Mama, saying: ‘I have already taken in Mendel the tailor and his whole family. Better you just make certain Zadorozhny’s wife doesn’t notice anything.’

Towards evening a short youth in a black hat came to our gate. A wet lock of hair hung down over his eyes. The shells of sunflower seeds stuck to his chin. He was followed by a tall, clean-shaven man in short trousers and a hat walking cautiously, along with a hatless fidgety man with swollen eyes and a fat face and a stout woman in a heavy shawl. Coming up behind these three was a group of thuggish-looking young men. We had seen the woman often before at the Galitsky Market. Now she was carrying an empty sack.

‘Open up!’ shouted the young fellow, pounding on the gate.

‘Ignaty came out from his lodgings.

‘Any Yids here?’ the fellow asked.

‘Sure, lots of them, just like you,’ Ignaty answered casually.

‘Taking in Yids, are ya?’ he screamed and shook the gate. ‘We know what’s going on here. Open up!’

‘Just you wait, I’ll call Colonel Zadorozhny over,’ Ignaty threatened. ‘He’ll take care of you.’

‘I couldn’t care less about those Jerusalem colonels. We’ll make mincemeat out of your colonel.’

At this point, Madame Zadorozhnaya, who had been listening from her window, could contain herself no longer. She came running across the courtyard like an angry hen, the sleeves of her black kimono waving and flapping as she went. ‘You scoundrel!’ she screamed and spat in his face through the gate. ‘How dare you insult an officer of the Imperial Army? You tramp! Vasily!’ she screeched. ‘Come here!’

A dumbstruck orderly came running out. He grabbed an axe from the woodshed and raced towards the gate. The youth jumped out of the way and ran off down the street, turning round as he went to make sure the orderly wasn’t chasing after him. His mates followed while the orderly shook the axe at their backs.

‘The idea!’ said Madame Zadorozhnaya, wrapping herself in her kimono and returning to her flat. ‘Every scoundrel is now going to start claiming that he’s a real Russian. Excuse me, but no! Be forewarned no one is going to get away with that this time!’

Thus the wife of the Black Hundred so unexpectedly drove the raiders from our door. The grown-ups laughed about this for a long time afterwards.

When the youth who’d run away stopped at a neighbour’s house and began to pound on their gate, Dima dragged me up to our attic. There was an enormous contraption up there that we’d dubbed the ‘Catapult’. It comprised a thick rubber band that the children of the previous tenants had nailed across the frame of a broken dormer window. I picked up off the floor a piece of yellow brick. Dima secured it to the outside of the band and together we pulled it back with all our might, aimed, and then launched the brick at the young fellow. The brick whistled through the air across the yard, knocking leaves off the trees, and landed at the feet of a tall old man who was walking along the pavement. It exploded into tiny fragments. We’d missed. Shocked, the old man dropped to the ground, then hopped up and took off running, while the youth, his boots hammering the pavement, followed.

‘Give me another brick!’ Dima shouted. But I was too slow, and the youth had already managed to get away.

‘You didn’t pull straight back, and that’s why we missed,’ Dima said. Dima always liked to blame others whenever something went wrong and then argue about it for a long time.

Even though we had missed, we were proud of our shot with the Catapult for a long while after. That evening Liza brought porridge to Ignaty’s lodgings for Mendel and his family. I went with her. All the windows had been covered. Ignaty sat on a stool softly playing his accordion and singing ‘On the Hills of Manchuria’ from the Russo-Japanese War – ‘Around us it’s calm, the hills, covered by mist . . .’ Mendel

the tailor sat sewing a new jacket with white thread by the light of a paraffin lamp while his family slept.

'They want to kill you,' Ignaty said, 'but you just go on sewing and sewing. And rightly so. One's got to earn a living.'

Liza stood by the door and listened with growing sadness to Ignaty's singing: 'High up, a lonely moon sheds its light upon the soldiers' graves . . .'

[1] Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–78), poet and critic popular with the liberal intelligentsia.

[2] The Black Hundreds were a collection of anti-revolutionary, anti-Semitic and pro-autocracy groups.

[3] Alexei Kuropatkin (1848–1925), imperial minister of war 1898–1904; Anatoly Stessel (1848–1915), general and commander of the Port Arthur garrison during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5).

18

The Red Lantern

I lit the small red lantern. It had an oil lamp inside, and the lantern's red glass cast a crimson light on the dusty rubbish along the shelves lining the narrow box room. I had begun to develop my father's photographs. Father had a small Kodak. He loved to take pictures, but the film canisters would end up lying around for months in a box in his desk drawer. Before every large holiday, the house was cleaned from top to bottom, and Mama would take out the canisters and give them to me to develop.

I enjoyed the work since I never could guess what would appear on the negatives. I also liked the fact that no one, not even Mama, dared to enter the room until I was done. I was cut off from the world. The usual household sounds – the clattering of plates, the chiming of clocks, the piercing voice of our maid Liza – were barely audible inside the room.

A papier-mâché mask hung on the wall. It was the mask of a clown with a snub nose and big, puffy cheeks that reminded me of pinecones. A reddish tuft of oakum poked out from under a small white top hat cocked on its head. In the red glow of the lantern the mask came to life. The clown peered down into the black basin where the film lay in the developer. He even winked at me. He smelled of paste. Sometimes our flat would become utterly quiet – as happens even in the noisiest of families. In those moments I couldn't stand being alone with the clown in the narrow room. Little by little I began to study his character. I knew that the clown liked making fun of people, that nothing in life was sacred to him, and that in the end he would have his revenge on us for keeping him in the box room for his entire life. At times it even seemed to me that the clown was so bored by the silence that he would actually mutter something to himself or even sing a strange little song:

> 'Twas on a Sunday that the hens swallowed the cock whole, While nonsense sat mute on the fence mixing jam in a bottomless bowl.

But all I had to do was open the box room's door and let in the bluish daylight, and in an instant the clown was dead and covered with dust.

This time it was my father who brought me several canisters and asked me to develop them. He had just returned from a trip to Moscow. It was the beginning of January 1906. My father had been in Moscow in the final days of the December uprising. He told us about the barricades in Presnya, the armed bands of revolutionaries and the artillery fire. Despite the failure of the uprising, my father returned home excited and invigorated. He was fully certain that just beyond the horizon lay the moment when all Russia would rise up and seize its long-awaited freedom.

'Do your best job with these,' he said. 'I've got some photographs in here of Moscow that are of historical significance. Thing is I just don't remember which canister they're in.'

The canisters were identical. My father hadn't bothered to mark them. I had no choice but to develop them one by one and see what I might find. There were no photographs of Moscow on the first roll, just a few pictures of a small, thin man in a short jacket and bow-tie. He was standing next to a wall with a long, narrow painting hanging on it. For a long time I couldn't make anything out on this painting. Eventually, I saw an emaciated, hook-nosed face with enormous, sad eyes. The face was ringed with bird feathers.

My father asked from the other side of the door: 'Well? Any Moscow photographs?'

'Not yet. Just some old man standing next to a painting on a wall.'

'That's Vrubel, of course! Don't you remember him? Be sure not to overdevelop it.'

None of the painting's details came out. Just the face and some of the feathers.

'I really want that photograph,' said my father. 'That's his *Demon*.'

Father left. Then I remembered how he had once said to Mama over breakfast that Mikhail Alexandrovich Vrubel had come to Kiev for a few days and had asked Father to visit him at his hotel.

'I don't understand your fascination with Vrubel,' Mama said. 'He's just another one of those Decadents! All those obsessed artists frighten me.'

Nevertheless, my father went to see Vrubel and took me with him. We entered the hotel near the

Golden Gate and went up to the fourth floor. The hallway had that hotel morning smell of eau-de-Cologne and coffee. My father knocked on a low door. A thin man in a worn jacket opened the door. His face, hair and eyes were of the same colour as his jacket – grey with yellowish flecks. This was Vrubel, the artist.

'Who's this young subject?' he asked, gripping me firmly by the chin. 'Your son? This boy was practically made to be painted.'

He took my father by the arm and led him to a table. I looked timidly around the room. It was a garret. A few watercolours were pinned to the dark wallpaper. Vrubel poured my father and himself a brandy, which he quickly drank before getting up and pacing about the room. The heels of his shoes clicked loudly on the parquet. I noticed his heels were very high. My father made some compliment about the watercolours.

'Junk!' Vrubel replied. He stopped pacing about the room and sat back down at the table. 'I've been nothing but a bundle of nerves lately, like some squirrel in a cage,' he said. 'I'm making myself sick. Georgy Maximovich, what do you say we go to Lukyanovka?'

'To St Cyril's Church?'

'Yes. I want to look at my work there. I've completely forgotten it.'

Father agreed. The three of us took a droshky to Lukyanovka. We rode for a long time down the endless Lvovskaya Street and then the just as endless Dorogozhitskaya Street. Vrubel and my father smoked. I watched Vrubel and felt sorry for him. He twitched and jerked the whole time. His eyes darted about aimlessly, he spoke incoherently, he lit one cigarette after another and then threw them out of the droshky without bothering to smoke them. My father spoke to him gently as to a child. We got out of the droshky near the Fëdorovskaya Church and then walked through the streets and gardens of Lukyanovka. We came out to the edge of a ravine. From here the road zigzagged down to the bottom, where we could make out the small cupola of St Cyril's Church.

'Let's sit for a while,' Vrubel suggested.

We sat down on the dirty grass growing along the side of the road. The sky over the Dnieper was a dull blue.

'I'm in a bad way, Georgy Maximovich,' said Vrubel, slapping his flabby cheek and laughing. 'I'm tired of dragging around this disgusting shell of mine.'

Obviously, I didn't understand what Vrubel meant by this, and I never would have remembered this conversation if my father had not recounted it to Mama, and then to Uncle Kolya, and a few acquaintances as well, and if they had all not felt so sorry for Vrubel.

Inside the church Vrubel examined his frescos in silence. They looked to me as if they had been moulded out of pieces of blue, red and yellow clay. I couldn't believe that this skinny little man could have painted such large images on the church walls.

'Now that's painting!' Vrubel exclaimed as we left the church.

I was shocked that Father reacted calmly to these words and even agreed with Vrubel when he never allowed me or my brothers to say a single boastful word. So when we parted with Vrubel on Reitarskaya Street, I told my father that I didn't like him.

'Why?' Father asked.

'He's a braggart.'

'You little fool!' said Father, slapping me on the back. 'Stand up straight!'

'Why am I a fool?' I asked, offended.

'First of all,' he said, 'you need to know that Vrubel is a great artist. Someday you'll realise this. Second, you also need to know he's sick. He's mentally unbalanced. Finally, you need to know one golden rule – never make a hasty judgement of someone. If you do, you're sure to regret it later. Now stop slouching once and for all! I didn't say anything the least bit insulting.'

Even after I had developed the photograph it was difficult to make out anything in the painting behind Vrubel's back. All I knew was that it was called *The Demon*.

I saw the painting for the first time much later, in the winter of 1911, in the Tretyakov Gallery. Icy clouds hung in the Moscow air. Steam poured from the swinging doors of the taverns. Amid this cosy winter scene, the city's boulevards encased in snow and ice, its windows frosted with rime and tinged with the greenish glow of gaslights, Vrubel's painting sparkled like a blue diamond, like some jewel from the icy peaks of the Caucasus. It hung in the gallery as if alive and absorbed the entire space into its cold beauty and its grandeur of human longing. I stood before *The Demon Downcast* for a long time. Slowly it began to dawn on me that the contemplation of such paintings not only produced visual pleasure but evoked from the depths of one's consciousness thoughts and ideas of whose existence one had never even been aware.

I thought of Lermontov. I imagined him walking into the Tretyakov Gallery, his spurs softly jangling, casually tossing his grey coat to the attendant in the vestibule's cloakroom, and then stopping to stare at *The Demon Downcast* with his gloomy eyes. It was he who wrote those bitter words about himself: 'Like the flame of a shooting star in the night sky, I am of no use to this world.' But my God, how wrong he was! How the world needs the brief flames of shooting stars, for man does not live by bread alone. He considered himself a captive of the world. He wasted the passion of his soul in the desert. But the desert blossomed after this and was brought to life by the power of his poetry, by his anger, his anguish and his knowledge of joy. For it was he, after all, who shyly confessed: 'From under the bush, a silvery lily of the valley nods her head in friendship.' And who knows, maybe the biting, rarefied air of the mountain heights, sprinkled with the demon's blood, also holds a faint hint of the scent of that welcoming woodland flower. And Lermontov, like that downcast demon, was perhaps just a child denied what he so desperately sought from life: freedom, justice and love.

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'Well, found any Moscow photos yet?' Father asked once more from behind the door.

His voice brought me out of my reverie. I started to develop the next roll and forgot about Vrubel. Images of Moscow streets and small houses covered in snow began to appear. Low barricades constructed out of barrels, boards, rocks and shop signs blocked the streets. Civilians holding rifles and revolvers stood next to the barricades. Then came images of tall buildings damaged by shells, the Gorbaty Bridge, the Zoological Garden clouded by dense smoke, bullet-riddled tavern signs, overturned trams. Everything was obscured by the winter haze, and nothing I did helped. No developer could dispel this haze and lend sharpness to the photographs. But the haze captured the atmosphere of the uprising most effectively. It was as if the photographs gave off a whiff of gunpowder and smoke.

Uprising! The word sounded so strange in the seemingly patriarchal Moscow of those days. I had read stories about the Indian Mutiny, I knew about the uprising of the Commune in Paris, the Decembrists' Rebellion, but the Moscow uprising seemed to me the most powerful and the most romantic. I got out a map of Moscow. Father showed me the places where the fighting had taken place and where the barricades had been erected – Chistye Prudy, Samotëka, Kudrinskaya Square, Malaya and Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Streets, Presnya and Gorbaty Bridge. These names have held a special fascination for me ever since as places that became historically significant in my own lifetime. Everything associated with the uprising became important – the icy Moscow winter, the tea houses where the rebels met, the intermingling of elements of ancient Moscow with the new era signalled by the uprising. Droshky drivers in their ragged old cloth coats, the gilded biscuits over the bakers' shops, the street vendors with their hot pies, and then amid all this – the whistling of bullets, the rushing about of armed men, the flash of steel revolvers, red flags and the words of 'The Song of Warsaw' – 'Assailed by hostile whirlwinds on all sides, oppressed most sinisterly by dark forces . . .' In all of it there was the poetry of struggle and the breath of freedom, which though approaching still lay shrouded in fog like a winter's dawn. And there was courage and faith and hope. Across the enormous expanse of the country, Russians followed the glow of the fires in Presnya and awaited the victory of the rebels. The uprising was like a winter storm – a harbinger of future whirlwinds and purifying upheavals. Today I can describe the elevated mood that seized me at the time, but back then I could only feel but not explain it.

The following day I made prints of all the photographs and gave them to my father. It was dark outside, and the lamp burned in his study. The light fell on the familiar objects on his desk – the steel steam-engine model, the statuette of Pushkin with his curly whiskers and the stacks of satirical revolutionary magazines – there were many of them in those days. Most prominent of all, standing in the place of honour, was a picture postcard with a portrait of Lieutenant Schmidt in a black cloak fastened with lion-head clasps.[1] Father lay on the sofa reading a newspaper. He looked at all the photographs and said: 'An incredible country! Vrubel and an uprising! All here living together side by side like neighbours, and all leading to one thing.'

'To what?'

'It's all leading to a better future. You'll see a great many interesting things in your life, Kostik. If, that is, you grow up to become an interesting person.'

[1] Lieutenant Pëtr Schmidt (1867–1906), one of the leaders of the uprising in Sevastopol during the revolution of 1905, for which he was executed.

19

Deserted Tauris

That summer of 1906, after I turned fourteen, Mama insisted that instead of Rëvny we spend the summer in Crimea. She chose the quietest of the Crimean towns – Alushta. We travelled by way of Odessa. The hotels in Odessa were all full, so we had to stay at the guest house of the Athos Monastery near the railway station. The novices – pale youths in cassocks with black patent-leather belts – served us cabbage soup and dried anchovies. I fell in love with everything – the cabbage soup, the beautiful white city, the sparkling seltzer water, the port. Grey clouds of pigeons circled in the air over the city, mixing with the white clouds of seagulls. Once again, I had come to visit the sea, although here, on the edge of the steppe, it seemed gentler somehow than on the coasts of the Caucasus.

An old steamer, the *Pushkin*, took us to Yalta. The sea was dead calm. The oak gunwales were too hot to touch. Everything in the saloon shook and rattled from the steamer's screw. The sun shone through the skylights, portholes and open doors. The intensity of the southern sun overwhelmed me. It made everything sparkle. Even the rough canvas sailcloth covering the portholes flickered like a flame. Crimea rose up out of the sea's blue depths like a Treasure Island. Clouds hovered over the lilac mountain peaks. The white port of Sevastopol sailed slowly towards us and greeted our old steamer with a midday cannon salute and the blue crosses of St Andrew's flags.

The *Pushkin* seethed and shuddered for a long time in the bay, sending up fountains of bubbles and roiling water, as she turned this way and that. We ran from one side of the boat to the other so as not to miss a thing. There was Malakhov Hill, the Bratskoe Cemetery, the Count's Quay, Fort Konstantin, thrusting out into the breakers, and the mutinous cruiser *Ochakov* surrounded by pontoons. Naval cutters shot past us, throwing up wakes of malachite water. I looked at it all spellbound. It was all true and not simply something that existed in the books I had read – this city where Nakhimov had died,[1] where cannonballs had exploded on the bastions, where the artillerist Leo Tolstoy had battled, where Lieutenant Schmidt had pledged his oath to the people. Here it was before me, this city, in the burning heat of the sun and the feathery shadows of the acacias.

The *Pushkin* reached Yalta in the evening. It slowly motored into the harbour as if entering a softly lit bower on a summer's eve. We disembarked at a stone pier. The first thing that caught my eye was a swarthy pedlar with a cart. He had hung a lantern on top of a pole that shone a light on his downy peaches and large plums covered with a greyish bloom. We bought some peaches and headed off for the Dzhalita Hotel, followed by porters lugging our baggage. I was so tired I fell asleep as soon as I got to the room, not even noticing the centipede hiding in the corner or the black cypresses outside the windows. For a fleeting moment I heard the soft voice of the fountain in the courtyard, but then sleep enveloped me and carried me off in a gently rocking ship's cabin to some magical land as mysterious as Crimea itself.

After Yalta with its magnificent seafront, Alushta, farther up the coast, struck me as dull. We settled on the edge of town, out beyond the Stakheevskaya embankment. There was nothing in the area but stony ground, thickets of strong-smelling thuya, the empty sea and the distant low mountains of Sudak. That is all there was in Alushta. But even this turned out to be enough, and I gradually reconciled myself to Alushta and then fell in love with it.

Galya and I often visited the neighbouring vineyard to buy the sweet-tasting *shashla* grapes, the strong, crisp *chaush* and pink muscats. The vineyard was full of singing cicadas. Tiny yellow flowers the size of pinheads grew all over the ground. An elderly woman by the name of Anna Petrovna lived there in a small white house. Her face was so tanned from the sun that her grey eyes looked white against her skin. She cut bunches of grapes from the vine for us. Sometimes she sent her daughter out to do it. Lena, a barefoot seventeen-year-old girl, had sun-kissed plaits arranged like a wreath on her head and her mother's grey eyes. The adults called her 'the mermaid'. Lena often passed our cottage at dusk on her way down to the sea. She bathed and swam for a long time, before returning with a towel over her shoulders and singing:

> Out there in the wide blue sea,

In the azure waters of our tomorrows,
We'll forget our grief,
And our earthly sorrows.

Galya made friends with Lena and learned everything she could about her. Galya always did love to question people about every last detail of their lives. She did this with the doggedness of a shortsighted and inquisitive person.

It turned out that Anna Petrovna was a widow, a former librarian from Chernigov, and after Lena had fallen ill with tuberculosis her doctor had recommended that they move to Crimea. Anna Petrovna had moved to Alushta, where she had married an old Ukrainian, the owner of the vineyard. The old man died soon after and so Anna Petrovna and Lena were the sole proprietors of the vineyard. Lena lived in Yalta in the winter and attended the gymnasium there but returned to Alushta every Sunday to see her mother. She was by now fully recovered from her illness.

Lena planned to become a singer after finishing school. Galya tried to talk her out of it. In her opinion, the only worthy occupation for a woman was teaching. Galya herself wanted to become a village schoolteacher. We were all tired of listening to Galya talk about this, especially since she would go on and on about her calling and kept insisting that there was no better occupation in the world than pedagogy even though none of us ever disagreed with her. Something about Galya's attempts to change Lena's mind made me angry. I loved the theatre. To spite Galya I loved to tell Lena about all the amazing plays I had seen: *The Blue Bird*, *A Month in the Country*, *Madame Sans-Gêne*, *Woe from Wit*.

I exaggerated a great deal. I predicted an alluring future for Lena. I liked to imagine that someday this thin, tanned girl, who swam better than any sailor, would make her way onto the stage dressed in an elegant dress with a long train, her bronzed skin showing through her makeup and a dark flower trembling on her breast as she sang. I wove my unrestrained daydreams around Lena. She listened to me, her head thrown back as if by the weight of her plaits, faintly blushing. Now and then she would ask: 'Oh, admit it, you're just making all this up? Right? Admit it. I won't be angry.'

She addressed me with '*vy*', the formal 'you', even though she was only three years older than me. In those days only the closest of friends used '*ty*', the informal 'you'.

I could not admit it since I truly believed in everything I imagined. This habit of mine would be the cause of many future troubles. And what was most astounding to me is that I have never met anyone in my entire life who made any effort to try to understand my habit or at least to try to excuse it. But Lena believed me. She wanted to believe everything I told her. If I didn't go with Galya to the vineyard for two or three days, Lena would bring us grapes herself, saying shyly to Mama: 'Anna Petrovna told me to give you these as a gift.' Then she'd steal a moment and quickly whisper to me: 'You're simply horrid! Why have you been staying away?'

Father did not stay long in Alushta. He had business to attend to in St Petersburg. Next, Borya left – he had to sit his entrance exams for the Kiev Polytechnical Institute. Father's departure upset Mama for some reason, and she stopped paying us any attention. She preferred it when we would simply disappear for the entire day down by the seaside, never even thinking to worry about us. I spent my days in the sea up to my waist in water hunting for crabs under the rocks. This ended one day after I stayed in the water until late in the evening and caught a cold that turned into pneumonia. To make matters worse, that first night as I lay bed with a fever, I was stung by a scolopendra.

August came. The school year was soon to start. We would have to return to Kiev. My illness upset all our plans. In the end, Mama sent Galya home with Dima and she remained with me in Alushta. I was seriously ill and for a long time. I could barely sleep at night. It hurt to breathe. I had to take slow, shallow breaths as I lay staring miserably at the room's white walls. Centipedes crawled in and out of the walls' cracks. A lamp burned on the table. The shadows cast by the medicine bottles formed prehistoric monsters, their long necks stretching up to the ceiling.

I turned away and looked at the black window. It reflected the light from my lamp. I could hear the rumbling of the sea outside. A moth beat against the glass. It was trying to escape the stuffy, medicinal smell of my room. Mama was sleeping in the next room. I called to her to ask for some water and to let the moth out. She opened the window and it flew away, and after that I calmed down. But then, I don't know how, but I saw that the moth had landed on the dry grass just outside, where it rested briefly before flying back through the window into my room. It looked huge now, the size of an owl. It settled on my chest. The moth felt so heavy on me, like a stone big enough to crush my heart. I called to Mama again and asked her to get rid of the moth. Her lips pursed, Mama removed the hot compress from my forehead and wrapped a blanket around me.

I lost count of the nights filled with a strange droning and the dry heat of the bedclothes. One day Lena

came to see me. At first, I didn't realise it was her. She was wearing a brown school dress, a black pinafore and small black shoes. Her fair hair had been neatly plaited and hung down on either side of her suntanned face. She had come to say farewell before her departure for Yalta. When Mama left the room, Lena put her hand on my forehead. It was as cold as ice. The end of one of her plaits brushed my face. I caught the warm, fresh scent of her hair. Mama returned. Lena quickly removed her hand, and Mama said that Lena had brought me some wonderful grapes.

'I'm afraid these were the best we had,' Lena replied. She was looking not at Mama, but at me, as if there was something important she wanted to say. Then she left. I heard her running down the stairs. Everyone had departed, and so every little sound reverberated clearly in the empty house.

From that day on I began to improve. The doctor said that even after I was well enough to get out of bed, I would have to remain in Alushta for at least two months, until the beginning of November. I needed to rest and regain my strength. And so, Mama decided to have Liza sent down from Kiev to look after me. Mama was in a hurry to get back to Kiev, although I still don't know why. A week later Liza arrived and the next day Mama took the horse-drawn coach to Simferopol. Liza gasped at every last thing. Mama had brought Liza to Kiev from the Bryansk woods, from Rëvny, and she had never before seen the sea, cypress trees or vineyards. I remained with Liza. I could get out of bed but wasn't allowed to leave the house. I spent the days reading on the glass-enclosed terrace under a cool autumn sun. I had found a copy of *Tristan and Isolde* in a chest of drawers. I read this marvellous legend several times, and each reading left me sadder and sadder. I decided to try to write my own legend in the spirit of *Tristan and Isolde* and spent several days working on it. In the end, I didn't get any further than a description of a stormy sea and the rocky shore.

At the end of September, the doctor finally gave me permission to go outside. I wandered about deserted Alushta all by myself. I loved going out to the wharf when the sea was rough and the waves came crashing in and shot up through the gaps in the wooden jetty. Once I visited Anna Petrovna. She served me coffee and said that I must come and visit again on Sunday because Lena was planning on returning home that day from Yalta. I couldn't wait for Sunday to arrive and to see Lena.

To this very day I still remember that Sunday as if it were yesterday thanks to two events.

I knew that Lena was arriving from Yalta on the morning cutter. I went down to the jetty to wait for her. But as soon as the cutter appeared around the cape, I hid behind the old wooden kiosk where they sold picture postcards of Crimea. I sat down on a rock and didn't move as the cutter moored at the jetty. Lena walked off and looked about for a familiar face and then, seeing none, slowly began walking towards home. I was afraid she'd see me. The whole thing was utterly foolish. She looked back a few times and then returned to the jetty and stood about for a time pretending to read some old posters that hung down in tattered strips from a signpost. I watched her furtively. She wore a heavy kerchief over her head. She had grown thin and pale in Yalta. She didn't move from the posters, but quickly stopped pretending to be reading them and dropped her eyes to the ground. Then she started for home again. This time for good. I waited a bit before walking home myself. I was ashamed of what a coward I had been.

I didn't know whether or not I should go and see Lena. I couldn't eat any dinner. Liza threatened to telegraph Mama about this, but seeing as how she could hardly read, I wasn't too worried.

After dinner I screwed up my courage, put on my coat and headed out. Liza shouted at me to button up my coat, but I paid no attention. I approached the vineyard. It was already bathed in crimson. I opened the gate. Just then the door to the white house flew open, and there was Lena. She was running towards me in nothing but her dress.

It was a good day. I overcame my shyness and told her all about Rëvny, my geography teacher Cherpunov and Aunt Nadya. Lena kept surreptitiously piling grapes and plums, greengages, on my plate. Then she said: 'Why didn't you bother to button your coat in this cold weather? Who are you trying to impress, you little dandy?'

'What about you? You ran out without any coat, just in your dress!'

'Because . . .' she said, and then hesitated. 'Because . . . I didn't have pneumonia.'

She blushed. Anna Petrovna looked at Lena over her spectacles and shook her head. 'Lena, don't forget you're no child anymore. You're seventeen now.' She said this as if Lena were already a grown woman and well past such foolishness.

Anna Petrovna and Lena walked me back and came in to see how I was getting by without Mama. Liza, embarrassed, turned red but quickly recovered herself and began to tell Anna Petrovna how disobedient I was and how I had left without bothering to button my coat. Anna Petrovna told her to come to her for anything she might need. Liza was delighted. She didn't know a soul in Alushta. Once in a while she would go for walks with me and pick worm-wood which she hung up to dry in her room. The rest of the

time she played patience. Liza had red cheeks and kind, puffy eyes. She was hopelessly naïve and believed whatever nonsense she was told.

Anna Petrovna and Lena left. I became bored. A long evening lay ahead of me. I wanted to go back to their house by the vineyard, but I knew this kind of thing 'wasn't done'. So I decided to go back to my story. I lit the lamp and sat down at the desk. But instead of a story, I began to write my first poem. I no longer remember it, except for the first line which has stuck in my memory: 'Oh, pick the flowers on the drooping stems . . .'

I liked the poem. I decided to keep writing late into the night, but Liza came in. 'What is this?' she said. 'You'll ruin your eyes! Besides, it's long past your bedtime!' With that, she blew out the light.

I lost my temper. 'I'm not a baby anymore,' I said, and then called her an idiot. Liza burst into tears and went to her room. In a pathetic voice she said, 'I'm leaving tomorrow for Kiev, on foot. You can do what you like here on your lonesome.'

I was quiet. Then Liza said she was going to send Mama a telegram tomorrow informing her of my behaviour. She muttered on and on to herself for a long time and then said with a sigh: 'Well, whatever. I'm done with the entire business. Go to sleep. Oh my, and what a horrible wind there is tonight on top of all this!'

A round wall clock hung over my head. Every time it struck two o'clock in the morning it woke me up. It happened again this morning and for a long time I could not understand what had happened. A crimson light was flickering on my wall. My window looked out onto the sea. Outside, the wind was howling. I sat up in bed and looked out of the window. A faint glow along the horizon lit up the low clouds and the rough water. I began to dress quickly.

'Liza!' I shouted. 'There's a fire out at sea!'

I heard her move, jump out of bed and also begin to throw on her clothes.

'What could possibly burn out on the water?' she asked.

'I don't know.'

'Then why did you get up?' She was still half asleep and confused.

'I'm going down to the shore.'

'I'll come too.'

We went out. The wind rushed around the house and hit me with a cold blast. The glow had spread higher up into the sky. The local Tatar man who looked after the cottage was standing by the gate. 'A steamer's on fire,' he said. 'It's horrible, but what can we do?'

We ran down to the shore. A bell, perhaps from the lifeboat station, was clanging near the jetty. Crowds stood all along the seashore, and I immediately lost Liza in the darkness. Fishermen in high boots and oilskins were dragging a boat over the pebbly beach to the water. I heard snatches of agitated voices: 'A passenger ship . . . Two miles out . . . Hold tight to the stern, all right? Don't let her roll . . .' The wet fishermen hopped into the boat and grabbed the oars. The boat rode up onto a wave and headed out to the open sea. Someone took me by the elbow. I turned round. Lena was standing beside me. In the faint glow I could see a stern look on her face. We stood in silence on the edge of the jetty. A white flare went up over the sea, then another.

'That means help's on the way,' said Lena. 'If it weren't for Mama, I would have gone with the fishermen in the lifeboat. I really mean it.'

She was silent for a moment and then asked: 'When are you leaving?'

For the first time she stopped addressing me with the formal 'you'. My heart skipped a beat.

'In a week, I guess.'

'So I'll still get to see you again. I'll try to come by a bit earlier.'

'Please do, I really want to see you too,' I answered, feeling as though with these frightful words I had fallen off a cliff.

'What should I do?' she asked, softly. 'Mama is frightened. She's here somewhere, over by the quay. You're not angry with me, are you?'

'What for?'

She didn't answer.

'Lena!' Anna Petrovna called from out of the darkness. 'Where are you? We're going home!'

'I'm leaving tomorrow by the early coach,' Lena whispered. 'Don't think of seeing me off. Goodbye.'

She shook my hand and left. I watched her go. For a few seconds I managed to follow the white kerchief on her head before it vanished.

The glow upon the sea dimmed. It was replaced by the green ray of a searchlight. It came from the destroyer *Intrepid* that was on her way to help the burning steamer. I found Liza, and we returned home. I wanted to lie down and fall asleep as soon as possible to keep from thinking about that amazing and

wonderful moment that had just taken place between Lena and me. In the morning, when the glow had been replaced by some wispy smoke, I went down to the quay and learned that the steamer had been lost. People said that a bomb had exploded in the hold, but the captain had managed to beach the steamer on some rocks offshore.

Upon hearing the news, I walked a long way down the road to Yalta. Just an hour earlier Lena had ridden in the coach along this same road. I sat down on the parapet overlooking the sea and stayed there for a long time with my hands tucked into the sleeves of my overcoat. I thought about Lena, and this made my heart ache. I recalled the smell of her hair, the fresh warmth of her breath, the troubled look in her grey eyes and the thin arch of her eyebrows. I couldn't understand what was happening to me. A terrible longing gripped me, and I burst into tears. I wanted only one thing – to see her, to hear her voice, to be near her.

I had just about decided to walk to Yalta when a cart came rattling around the bend. I quickly wiped my eyes and turned to look at the sea. But all of a sudden they filled with tears again, and I could see nothing but a bright blue smudge. I was chilled to the bone and couldn't stop shaking. The driver of the cart, an old man in a straw hat, stopped his horses and said: 'Climb in, my friend, I'll take you to Alushta.'

I climbed into the cart. The old man looked over his shoulder and asked: 'You're not from the orphanage, are you?'

'No, I'm a pupil at the gymnasium,' I said.

The last days in Alushta were unusually sad and beautiful, as it always is in those places we are sorry to have to leave. Fog rolled in from the sea, leaving the grass wet in front of our cottage. The sun seeped through the fog. Liza fed yellow acacia wood into the stove. The leaves were falling. But they weren't golden, as at home in Kiev, but greyish with lilac-coloured veins. Waves rolled silently out of the fog and onto the shore and then silently back. Dead seahorses lay on the shingle. The peaks of Chatyr-Dag and Babugan-Yaila were wrapped in clouds. Fierce dogs glancing about distrustfully herded flocks of sheep down from the mountains. The autumn fog made everything so still that standing on my balcony I could hear voices coming from the village far down below. The flames of the braziers glowed in the market inn, and the smell of burnt fat and roast mullet hung in the air.

Liza and I had plans to leave on Monday morning. Liza had already hired a driver to take us to Simferopol. I waited for Lena all Saturday, but she never came. I walked past the vineyard several times but saw no one. Sunday morning there was still no sign of her. I walked over to the coach station. It was empty. Worried, I went home. Liza handed me an envelope.

'Some boy dropped it off,' she said. 'It must be from Anna Petrovna. I expect they want you to come over and to say goodbye. You should go. They're nice people.'

I went into the garden, ripped open the envelope and took out a strip of paper. 'Come to the three plane trees at six. Lena.'

I got to the three plane trees not at six but at five. It was a deserted place. The three plane trees stood in a rocky ravine near a dried-up stream. Everything around was withered other than a few scattered tulips that had somehow managed to bloom. There must have been a garden here at some time. A small wooden bridge had been put up over the stream. At the base of one of the trees stood a rickety bench, its metal legs covered in rust. Even though I had come early, Lena was already there. She was sitting on the bench, her hands clasped between her knees. Her kerchief had fallen from her head onto her shoulders. She turned round when I approached.

'You won't understand,' she said, taking my hand. 'No, pay no attention to me . . . I'm always talking a lot of nonsense.'

Lena stood up. She smiled apologetically. She lowered her eyes and glanced up at me sullenly. 'Mama says I'm mad. Well, whatever! Farewell!'

She grabbed me by my shoulders, pulled me towards her and kissed me on the lips. Gently pushing me away, she said: 'Now go! And don't look back! Please. Just go!' Tears welled in her eyes. One rolled down her cheek and left a narrow, wet streak.

And so I went. But I couldn't stop myself from looking back. Lena was holding onto the trunk of the tree, her head back as if from the weight of her plaits. She was watching me.

'Go on!' she screamed. Her voice sounded strange. 'It's just a load of nonsense!'

I left. It was already getting dark. The sun was setting behind Kastel Mountain. The wind blew from the Yaila, rustling the dry leaves. I didn't realise at the time that it was finished, all over. Only much later did I come to understand that for some unknown reason life had taken from me then something that might have been happiness.

The next morning Liza and I left for Simferopol. Rain was pouring in the forests around Chatyr-Dag

and it lashed the windows of our carriage all the way back to Kiev. No one took any notice of my return home. Something bad had happened to our family. But at the time I didn't know what. I was actually glad no one paid me any attention. I spent all my time thinking about Lena, but I never could bring myself to write to her.

I did not return to Crimea again until 1921. By then everything that had happened between us was just a memory, one that no longer caused any pain but led me to reflect. We all have these moments of reflection, although I wonder whether they're worth talking about.

[1] Pavel Nakhimov (1802–55), Russian admiral killed in the Crimean War.

20

Ruin

After our family's Crimean holiday everything suddenly changed. Father had an argument with the head of the South-West Railway. He quit his job and our financial well-being came to an immediate end.

We moved from Nikolsko-Botanicheskaya to Podvalnaya – 'Cellar' – Street, where, as if fate were mocking us, we took a basement flat. We lived off whatever personal belongings Mama could sell. Silent men in sheepskin hats appeared with ever greater frequency in our dark, chilly rooms. Their sharp eyes roamed about the flat, taking in our furniture, paintings and the china laid out on the table, and they discussed business quietly and confidently with Mama and went off. An hour or two later a cart would drive into the courtyard and soon depart with a chest of drawers, a table, a mirror, a rug.

In the mornings we would find a Tatar man in a black quilted skullcap in our kitchen. We called him 'Shurum-Burum'. He would be squatting and examining Father's trousers and jackets or some sheet in the light. Shurum-Burum liked to haggle for a long time, leave and then come back, which drove Mama to fits of anger. Finally, Shurum-Burum would agree and shake on the deal, pull out a fat wallet from his pocket, and, after spitting delicately on his fingers, count out his torn banknotes.

Father was almost never at home. He left early in the morning and returned after we were asleep. Where he spent his days, none of us knew. Apparently, he was looking for work. Mama aged overnight. She stopped taking care of her hair. Grey strands hung down over her face. Borya left us and took a room at the Progress boarding house near the railway station, ostensibly since it was closer to the Polytechnical Institute. In truth, he left because he no longer got along with Father, whom he blamed for all our misfortune, and he didn't want to live in our depressing surroundings on Podvalnaya Street. Borya kept himself by giving lessons, but he couldn't spare any money to help us. Dima also gave lessons or, as it was then called, worked as a 'tutor'. I alone was too young to give lessons, and Galya was so short-sighted that the only thing she could do was to help Mama around the house. We had to let Liza go.

One morning the porter brought in a gaunt, creaky old man who turned out to be a bailiff. He impounded almost all of our remaining possessions to cover mysterious debts that Father had kept hidden from Mama. Now it all came out into the open. After that Father took the first job he could get – an awful position at a sugar factory near Kiev – and moved out. We were left on our own. Grief overtook us. Our family was dying, and I understood this. This was especially difficult for me after Crimea, after my short, sad love affair with Lena, after my happy childhood. Once a month Uncle Kolya sent money to Mama from Bryansk. Mama cried from shame every time the money arrived.

One day I saw Mama in the school director's waiting room. I ran towards her, but she turned away, and then I understood that she didn't want me to see her. I didn't understand why she had gone to see the director, but I never asked her about it. A few days later our new director, Tereshchenko, who had replaced Bessmertny, stopped me in the hall. Short, fat and bald, with a head that looked like it had been buttered (we called him 'Butter Head'), he said: 'Be sure to tell your dear mother that the school board has granted her request and you and your brother will be exempted from all school fees. But don't forget, this is done only for good pupils. And so, I advise you to improve your marks.'

This was the first time in my life I felt humiliated. Back at home I said to Mama: 'Dima and I have been exempted from our school fees. Why did you go to see the director?'

'What else could I do?' Mama asked in a soft voice. 'Take the two of you out of school?'

'I could go out and earn my own money.'

Then for the first time I saw fear on Mama's face, almost as if she had been struck. 'Don't be angry,' Mama said and lowered her head. She was sitting at the table and sewing. 'How could I have you go out and work?' She started to cry. 'If only you knew how much it hurts me to think of what he's done to us, and especially to you! How could he have dared? How could your father have ever been so foolish? How?'

For some time now Mama had started to refer to Father as 'he' or 'your father'. She cried, slumped over an old dress. Scraps of fabric and white thread lay on the floor around her.

Mama had sold off almost all our things. The flat was now dank and empty. A cold, harsh light shone from the windows, through which, down in the cellar, we saw nothing but shuffling boots and galoshes.

The constant shuffling of dirty feet through the wintry slush was distracting and unsettling. It seemed as if all these strangers were walking through our flat, bringing in the cold from the street with them, and considering it unnecessary to even deign to look at us.

That winter Mama received a letter from Uncle Kolya that upset her very much. As we sat at the table later in the evening, each of us busy with some task by the light of our only lamp, Mama announced that Uncle Kolya was insisting that I come and live with him for a time in Bryansk, where I would go to school, and that this was absolutely necessary until Father got a good job and returned to the family. A frightened Galya looked at Mama. Dima was silent.

'Your father's not coming back,' Mama informed us. 'He has other attachments. That's why he went into debt and left us destitute. And I don't want him back. I don't want to hear anything more about this. Not one word.'

Mama, her lips pursed, was silent for a long time.

'Well, that's that,' she finally said. 'It's not worth talking about. What are we going to do with Kostik?'

'It's simple,' said Dima, not looking at Mama. Dima thought everything was simple. 'I'm finishing school this year and will then be off to Moscow to enrol at the Technological Institute. We'll sell everything. And then you, Mama, and Galya will move to Moscow and live with me. We'll manage. And Kostik will just go and live with Uncle Kolya for a time.'

'What are you saying?' Galya said. 'What sort of life would he have there? And why should we all be separated?'

I sat with my head down, feverishly drawing flowers and swirling scribbles on a piece of paper. For a while now I had taken to drawing elaborate doodles on some scrap of paper whenever I felt bad.

'Stop drawing!' said Mama. 'I don't understand, why are you smiling? What do you think about all this?'

'I'm not smiling,' I mumbled, even though I could feel the awkward smile on my face. 'It's just . . .'

I fell silent and went on doodling. I couldn't stop.

'Kostik, darling,' Mama said in a weak voice, 'why don't you say something?'

'All right,' I said, 'I'll go . . . if I have to . . .'

'That would be best,' said Dima.

'Yes . . . it'll be fine . . . of course,' I said to keep from saying nothing.

Everything fell to pieces at that moment. I saw nothing but a burning loneliness before me, and I felt utterly useless. I wanted to tell Mama that she needn't send me to Bryansk, that I could give lessons just as well as Dima, that I could even be of help to her, that it was all so painful for me, and that I couldn't stop thinking that they were kicking me out of the family. But my throat hurt so badly and my jaw was clenched so tightly that I couldn't speak, and so I sat there not saying a word. For an instant the idea struck me of going to be with Father the next day. But the idea had gone as quickly as it had come, and I was left feeling that I was already completely alone.

I eventually pulled myself together and with difficulty managed to say once again that I was ready – happy even – to go to Bryansk, but my head hurt now and so I would like to go and lie down. I went to the cold room I shared with Dima, undressed quickly, lay down, pulled the covers over my head, clenched my teeth, and did not move the entire night. Mama came into my room and tried to speak to me, but I pretended to be asleep. She took my school greatcoat, laid it over me and went out.

The preparations for my move to Bryansk dragged on until December. It was hard for me to say goodbye to my school and my friends and to begin my new and what I assumed would be sad life. I wrote to Father to tell him I was moving to Bryansk but heard nothing for a long time until just days before my departure.

I typically walked through the deserted square behind the Opera House on my way home from school. I always walked together with my friends Stanishevsky and Matusevich, who lived in the same direction. One day we encountered a young woman in the square. She was slight and wore a thick veil. She passed us, stopped and then turned to watch us. We ran into the woman the next day at the exact same spot. She came up to us and said to me: 'Pardon me, but are you Georgy Maximovich's son?'

'Yes, I am.'

'I need to speak with you.'

'Certainly,' I said, blushing.

Stanishevsky and Matusevich left. They pretended none of this interested them in the slightest and didn't even turn round.

'Georgy Maximovich asked me to give you a letter,' she said in a hurry, digging around for something in her handbag. 'You understand he wanted it to reach you directly . . . Forgive me for telling you this . . . I could not refuse him. I recognised you at once. You look like your father. Here's the letter.'

She handed me an envelope.

'Are you going away?

'Yes, in a few days.'

'Oh, well . . . it's a pity. It didn't have to be this way.'

'You'll be seeing my father?'

She didn't say a word, just nodded.

'Kiss him for me,' I blurted. 'He's very good.' I had wanted to tell her to love and care for him, but all that came out were these few words: 'He's very good.'

'Really?' she said and started to laugh, opening her mouth just enough to show her small yet very white, glistening teeth. 'Thank you!'

She shook my hand and hurried off. The bracelet on her wrist made a faint jingling sound. To this day I still do not know the woman's name. I've been unable to discover it. Only Mama knew, but she took the secret with her to the grave. Her voice, laugh and bracelet reminded me of the woman I had once seen at Cherpunov's. Perhaps if it had not been for the heavy veil I would have recognised her, this butterfly from the island of Borneo. Even now I am at times disturbed by the notion that this had been the same young woman who had treated me to cocoa at Kirchheim's.

My father's letter was short. He told me to endure my struggles with courage and dignity. He wrote:

> Perhaps one day our luck will change and then I can help you. I firmly believe that you will grow up to be a true man and will succeed where I have failed. Remember this one bit of advice (I always made sure not to bore you with too much): never pass a hasty judgement on anyone, including me, until you know all the circumstances and until you have gained enough experience to understand the things you can't possibly understand now. Be well, write to me, and don't worry.

Only Mama and Galya were at the station to see me off. My train left in the morning. Dima couldn't miss his classes. He kissed me before he left for school without saying a word. Mama was cold and kept her hands in her muff. Galya clung to her. Her eyesight had got much worse in the past year. She was confused by the crowd and the trains' whistles frightened her. Mama made the sign of the cross over me, kissed me with her thin, cold lips, led me by the arm off to the side, and said: 'I know that this is hard for you and you're angry. But do try to understand that it's you most of all I want to spare from our poverty and our troubles. This was the only reason I insisted that you go to Uncle Kolya.'

I told her I understood and wasn't angry. I uttered the right words, but my heart felt empty and my only wish was for the train to hurry up and leave so we could end this wretched parting. Mama and I must have already had our true parting the night she laid my coat across me in bed for the last time. The train began to move, and I lost sight of Mama and Galya through the window. The engine's thick smoke had enveloped the platform and hid everyone from view. The carriage, filled with winter's weak light, was as cold as my heart. The windows let in a piercing draught. The sight of the snowy plains made me feel worse. A harsh wind blew all night. I was tired but couldn't sleep. I stared at the candle in the lamp. The wind bent the flame down to one side and tried to put it out. I told myself that if the flame didn't die then I could still expect some good things to come my way in life. The candle struggled mightily against the wind and come morning was still burning. I felt a bit better.

When I got off at Bryansk in the morning it was so cold that the air rang with the sound of sleigh runners across the hard snow. The frost clung to the earth like a thick layer of smoke. The frozen sun gave off a crimson glow. A sleigh had been sent to meet me. Inside lay a heavy sheepskin coat, a hood and long mittens. I wrapped myself up, and the horses took off at a gallop. We rushed along through the glistening, powdery snow – first along a causeway, then over the ice of the river Desna. The bells on the horses' harnesses jingled wildly. Far off in the distance up on a hill, the old town, shaggy with hoar-frost and icicles, sparkled like a child's tinsel toy.

The sleigh stopped by a wooden house built on the side of a hill. I climbed the steps and the door flew open. Aunt Marusya grabbed me by the arm, pulled me into the dining room, where reflected sunlight danced about on the ceiling, and insisted I drink half a glass of red wine. My lips were so cold it hurt to speak. Everything at Uncle Kolya's was loud and cheerful. The samovar roared, Mordan barked, Aunt Marusya laughed, sparks shot with a pop from the stoves. Uncle Kolya soon arrived from the Arsenal. He kissed me, took me by the shoulders and gave me a playful shake. 'The main thing is not to get discouraged! We're going to do some wonderful things together.'

I slowly began to thaw out at Uncle Kolya's. As always in such circumstances, my memory pushed aside everything unpleasant. It was as if my memory had cut out the bad sections in a piece of cloth and sewn together only the good parts – autumn in Crimea and the cheerful, noisy Russian winter. I tried not to think about what had recently happened in Kiev. I preferred to recall Alushta, the three plane trees

and Lena. I even wrote a letter to her in Yalta, but never could bring myself to send it. It seemed to me very stupid. I tried hard to write something cleverer, but no matter how much I worked on the letter, it was no better.

21

Artillerymen

The artillery officers at the Bryansk Arsenal liked to call Uncle Kolya 'Colonel Vershinin'. Uncle Kolya, with his black beard and lively dark eyes, actually did look like Vershinin from Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, or at least as we all imagined Vershinin must have looked.

Just like Vershinin, Uncle Kolya believed in and loved to talk about our bright future, and he was gentle and full of life. But unlike Vershinin, he was an excellent metallurgist and the author of many learned articles about the properties of various metals. He even translated these articles into French himself – he spoke the language perfectly – and published them in the Paris *Revue de Métallurgie*. His articles were also published in Russia, but not as often as in France. When I arrived in Bryansk, Uncle Kolya was engrossed in the production of Damascus steel. Uncle Kolya's lust for life was remarkable. He seemed to be interested in everything. He subscribed to every literary journal, played the piano beautifully, knew astronomy and philosophy, and was a witty and indefatigable conversationalist.

Bearded Captain Rumyantsev was Uncle Kolya's most devoted friend. He looked like Fet, except that he had bright red hair, bad eyes and a kindly disposition. He always looked uncomfortable and out of place in his officer's uniform, and even the Bryansk school-children teased him as the 'paper soldier'.

It wasn't easy to get a good look at Rumyanstev. He was always hidden behind clouds of tobacco smoke and was so shy he preferred to sit in the darkest corners of the living room. There he would sit hunched over a chessboard absorbed in a problem. If he succeeded in solving it, he broke out in laughter and rubbed his hands.

Rumyantsev rarely joined in the conversation. He would just sit and listen, occasionally clearing his throat and screwing up his eyes. But if the conversation turned to politics – the State Duma, say, or workers' strikes – he came alive and expressed the most extreme opinions.

Rumyantsev was a bachelor. He lived with his three sisters – all of them petite and each with cropped hair and a pince-nez on her nose. All of them smoked and wore stiff black skirts and grey blouses to which they affixed a watch with safety pins in exactly the same spot, as if by mutual agreement. The sisters were always hiding people at their flat – students, old men in billowing cloaks and strange women as severe-looking as themselves. Uncle Kolya warned me never to say a word to anyone about the people staying at the Rumyantsevs'.

In addition to Rumyantsev and his sisters, another frequent visitor to Uncle Kolya's was Staff Captain Ivanov, a meticulously neat and tidy man with delicate white hands, an exquisitely trimmed blond beard and a high, delicate voice. Like most bachelors, Ivanov had to find a home somewhere, which he did at Uncle Kolya's. He came by every evening to sit and chat. Taking off his overcoat and undoing his sword belt in the front hall, he always blushed and explained that he just happened to be passing by or that he had some important matter to discuss with Uncle Kolya. But then, of course, he made himself comfortable and stayed until midnight.

I was grateful to Ivanov for breaking me of the habit of being ashamed of doing simple things for myself. Once I ran into him at the market. He was buying potatoes and cabbages. 'Would you please help me carry all this to the droshky?' he asked me. 'Pëtr is sick, so I have to do everything myself.' (Pëtr was his batman.)

As we were carrying a heavy sack of cabbages to the droshky, we met the young German teacher from the Bryansk gymnasium. In response to my bow, she turned up her nose and looked away. I blushed.

'Don't be embarrassed,' said Ivanov. 'You're not doing anything to be ashamed of. My way of dealing with people who give me haughty looks is to stare straight back at them. It's most effective.'

We took our seats in the droshky, now piled high with vegetables, and drove off down Moskovskaya Street, the main thoroughfare. We passed by many acquaintances. We even passed General Sarandinaki, head of the Arsenal, riding in a carriage and pair. All of them chuckled upon seeing us in the droshky with the vegetables, but Ivanov just stared them straight in the eyes. His gaze made them uncomfortable and they stopped chuckling and ended up giving us a friendly nod. Sarandinaki stopped his carriage and offered to send Ivanov his batman, but Ivanov politely declined the offer, saying that he could manage these simple chores just fine by himself. The general raised his eyebrows and gave his driver a gentle

poke in the back with his black scabbard, and his grey horses set off at a trot.

'You see how simple it is,' Ivanov said to me. 'Never give in to prejudice.'

I knew that Ivanov was right, of course, but nevertheless I had hated having all those mocking eyes directed at me. The bad habit was just too ingrained in me. I used to catch myself being frightened of not behaving like everyone else or being embarrassed about our poverty and trying to hide it from my schoolmates.

Mama had viewed our change in fortunes as the greatest of tragedies. She did everything possible to conceal it from her friends. They all knew that my father had deserted the family, but whenever someone asked, Mama always said that he had simply gone away for a while on a trip and that everything at home was just fine. She sat up at night darning and mending our clothes in the hope people wouldn't notice any signs of our destitution. Mama's courage had forsaken her, and we inherited her timidity.

As the droshky climbed the hill to Ivanov's house, cabbages started to fall out of the sack, rolling and bouncing back down the road to the delight of a group of boys. The driver stopped. We climbed down and began gathering up the spilled heads of cabbage. I must have been red in the face from shame, because Ivanov took one look at me and said, 'How about I do it myself. I think it'd be better you just went on home.'

If before I had been ashamed of picking up cabbages in front of passers-by, after Ivanov's words I was so ashamed of myself that tears came to my eyes. I frantically gathered up the remaining cabbages and managed in between to cuff the ears of a small boy, the son of the local merchant Samokhin, who had been dancing about the pavement and shouting:

> The silly schoolboy couldn't control his baggage
> And now look, just look at all the cabbage!

Howling and rubbing his eyes, little Samokhin ran home and hid.

I looked at Ivanov and, judging by his sly expression, felt certain that he had spilled the cabbages on purpose.

After that I began to show off. Every morning I went out with a wooden shovel to clear the snow in front of our house, I split firewood and kept the stove burning, and far from trying to avoid chores asked to be given as many as possible. As for little Samokhin, he never stopped yelling at me from the safety of his fenced yard: 'Blue beef !' (All of us boys from the gymnasium were called 'blue beef' because of our blue school caps.) But Samokhin's mocking no longer bothered me in the least.

Ivanov's lessons in life were reinforced by those I received from Lieutenant-Colonel Kuzmin-Karavaev, a narrow-chested man with steely grey eyes. He had founded the first consumers' cooperative in Bryansk and opened the town's first grocery shop on Volkhovskaya Street. He purchased all the goods and wares himself and then sold them from behind the counter of his packed little store. This venture of Karavaev caused a commotion among the merchants of Bryansk. The local head of the Merchants' Guild sent letters denouncing him to the Artillery Staff Headquarters in St Petersburg. The town's intelligentsia and the workers of the Arsenal, however, stood firmly behind Karavaev, and the denunciations did no good. His shop grew and prospered with each passing day.

We all took turns helping Karavaev in his shop, and he even hired me as his regular assistant. I spent almost all my free time there, breaking open the smelly crates of groceries and weighing out salt, f lour and sugar. Protecting his elegant officer's uniform beneath a heavy apron like a blacksmith might wear, Karavaev worked fast, but still managed to joke with his customers and tell me interesting things about where all the different wares and foods came from. Karavaev's shop sold goods from all over the country – tobacco from Feodosia, wines from Georgia, caviar from Astrakhan, lace from Vologda, mustard from Sarepta, chintz from Ivanovo-Voznesensk and glassware from the Maltsov workshops. The shop smelled of herring brine and soap and, most of all, the heavenly aroma of fresh sacking kept in the back room.

In the evening Karavaev locked and bolted the shop door, and we sat down to a cup of strong tea. While the kettle rattled on the iron stove, Karavaev would cut the sugar with a flat Japanese bayonet, sending blue crystal sparks into the air, and I fetched the *zhamki* – sweet honey cakes – from a wooden bin.

Someone always came by the shop to tea – either Ivanov, or the Rumyantsev sisters, or Aunt Marusya. Ivanov would sit down on an empty crate and, without bothering to remove his overcoat or even his gloves, try to prove to Karavaev that Russia had not developed enough to even need shops like his. Karavaev coughed as if he were being suffocated and did his best to ignore Ivanov's arguments. Aunt Marusya always brought her homemade biscuits and cakes. The Rumyantsev sisters, their pince-nez flashing, drank tea from their saucers. They called Karavaev 'Don Quixote' and said that he was wasting his time with his shop. Russia, they insisted, didn't need petty little things like grocery stores, no, what

Russia needed were great upheavals. At this point Ivanov would begin to jingle his spurs and burst into his rendition of 'Malbrough s'en va-t-en guerre'. The Rumyanstev sisters would then call him a reactionary, get up and leave.

Early in the spring the shop burned down. It had been a crude and obvious case of arson – the shop door had been smashed in and the goods doused with paraffin. The whole town knew that the Bryansk merchants had set the fire, but the investigation dragged on and on and in the end no one was ever arrested. Karavaev grew thin and haggard, his cough got worse, but he refused to take it seriously, saying: '*Finita la commedia!* The only thing that might save our country is some great upheaval. Pull all Russia up onto its hind legs, then we'll finally get somewhere.'

The losses from the fire were considerable. The members of the cooperative – workers from the Bryansk Arsenal and Karavaev's fellow artillery officers – had difficulty covering them. Remarkably, Staff Captain Ivanov paid for the lion's share of the losses himself. He was a frugal man and had managed to save several thousand roubles during his years of service at the Arsenal. He gave almost all his money to Karavaev.

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I spent the winter and summer in this friendly family of officers. But the pain of what had happened back in Kiev never left me. I couldn't stop thinking about my mother and father, and at times I felt so ashamed to be living in this warm and welcoming home where the mood was always happy and relaxed. I could see before my eyes our cold cellar flat, the empty table with its few scraps of bread, Mama's worried expression, and Dima, exhausted from tutoring. Mama wrote seldom; Galya and Dima not at all. Sometimes I wondered whether Mama didn't write because she couldn't even afford postage stamps. I had to do something to help her, but I didn't know what.

I could not get used to the Bryansk gymnasium. All the boys in my form were much older than me. As the days passed, I missed my old school more and more and tried to find some way to return to Kiev. In the end I wrote a letter to Suboch, our Latin teacher. I told him everything that had happened to me and asked whether I might be able to come back. Soon after, I received an answer.

'With the start of the school year this autumn,' Suboch wrote, 'you will once again be a student of the First Gymnasium, in my form, and will not be obliged to pay any school fees. To help you support yourself in a modest but fully independent manner, I can offer you several tutoring jobs. You won't be a burden to anyone. Don't torment yourself over what has been – *tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis* – we must hope that we change for the better.'

I read this businesslike letter and a spasm gripped my throat. I realised the affection in it and, at the same time, I realised that from this moment on I alone, relying on no one, was responsible for my life and future.

The realisation was terrifying, even though I was almost sixteen years old.

22

Kean, the Great Tragedian

Yellow posters had gone up on the fences around Bryansk announcing the arrival of the actor Orlenev,[1] then on tour.

The posters had been printed on thin, rough paper. The paste had soaked right through them, and the goats ripped them off the fences with their teeth and ate them. They walked about chewing, and one could read the words *Genius . . . Dissipation* printed in big black letters on the yellow strips of paper dangling from their mouths. Only a few of these posters had survived and on these it could be read that Orlenev would be appearing in Bryansk in the role of the English tragedian Kean in a play called *Kean, or Genius and Dissipation*[2]. Uncle Kolya bought tickets well in advance. For several days all we talked about at home was Orlenev.

The play was being put on at the Summer Theatre in the municipal park. It was an old wooden structure covered in peeling pink paint. Years' worth of posters, drenched by the rain, hung in tattered clumps from the walls. The theatre had been boarded up for ages. At dusk, bats flew out from under the eaves and darted about over the deserted back alleys. Young ladies in white dresses shrieked from fear – there was an old superstition that bats were drawn to anything white and once they attached themselves you could do nothing to prise them loose. The abandoned theatre appeared mysterious. I was certain that in its empty hall and dressing rooms withered flowers, pots of greasepaint, ribbons and yellowing sheet music lay scattered about, all left behind from those days when, according to local lore, a touring company had once passed through and put on an operetta. I imagined young women with rouged cheeks and blue-shadowed eyes running over creaking boards from their dressing rooms onto the stage, their velvet trains trailing behind them. Impudent Lotharios strummed seductively on their guitars, the cruel words of their romances tearing at the hearts of the simple townsfolk:

> I dreamed of a day, never to return,
> And of the one who shall never come . . .

That theatre had seen it all – young Gypsies with heartbreaking voices, ruined landowners smelling of horse sweat – they'd ride a hundred versts just to hear some Nina Zagornaya sing – cavalry officers with black whiskers, merchants in brown bowlers, and trembling young brides in ruffled pink dresses as fluffy as foam.

This theatre conjured up for me thoughts of July nights, when lightning flashed over the tops of the lime trees and the rush of blood to your head made you giddy. Nights when passing love and unruly passion left neither fear nor regret and when one would risk everything for nothing more than a single glance. One glance, to the jingling sound of horse bells and the whoops of a tipsy coachman. One glance, like lightning in the sultry black night filled with the scent of the lime tree blossoms and the distant hum of the Bryansk forest, wild and impenetrable and capable of healing any heart suffering from melancholy and betrayal. The walls of the theatre held inside them the echoes of long-silenced voices, the memories of reckless lives, seductions, duels, muffled sobs and burning hearts.

The theatre seemed long dead and shrouded in cobwebs and destined never to be used again. But it was opened up, cleaned and aired. New carpet was laid in the aisles, and the dust was brushed from the boxes' velvet upholstery, after which it went from grey to cherry red. The chandelier up under the roof was lit. Its old crystals shone, dim and uncertain, but then, with the first chords of the orchestra, they burst boldly to life and twinkled with the light of hundreds of multi-coloured stars. Old ushers in white cotton gloves took their places at the doors. The air was filled with the smell of perfume, sweets and the freshness of the garden. A murmur arose, of muffled voices, jingling spurs, creaking chairs, laughter and the rustling of the little programmes decorated with lyres and oak leaves.

'Orlenev, Orlenev, Orlenev!' the audience called from every corner of the theatre.

Uncle Kolya took his seat in the box, elegantly dressed in his uniform frock coat with its black velvet collar. Aunt Marusya sat next to him radiating an ashy brilliance from her new smoke-grey dress, her hair and her excited grey eyes – this was her first visit to the theatre in a very long time. Staff Captain

Ivanov strode casually down the carpeted aisle, the little spurs on his pointy-toed boots clinking ever so softly. Even Captain Rumyantsev combed his thick reddish beard and put on his best coat. He kept taking his handkerchief out of his back pocket to wipe his flushed face. The Rumyantsev sisters sat close together in a row, their cheeks blazing.

My old friends from Rëvny also came – Volodya Rumyantsev and Pavlya Tennov. Even though there was a seat for him in the box, Volodya went up to the gallery. He had quarrelled with his sisters. Pavlya sat with his legs crossed and a condescending look on his face. Having lived a long time in St Petersburg as a student, he expected little from provincial theatricals.

Aunt Marusya pulled me towards her, picked a piece of lint off my jacket collar, took a good look at me and then smoothed my hair. 'Now, that's better.' I glanced at myself in the tarnished mirror at the back of the box. I was terribly pale and so thin I looked as if I might snap in two like some little child.

The curtain went up. The play began.

I had seen good actors in Kiev, but this small, sad man with sharp features was performing a miracle on the stage. With every word and every expression, he revealed the pain and nobility of the great Kean. When he cried in his ringing voice, 'The deer's been shot!', all his hopeless despair and need for mercy erupted in that single exclamation.

I was trembling by the time the players seated in the audience began acting out the staged quarrel. I could not hold back my tears when the curtain fell and the old English stage manager, his eyes red from crying, came out to the front of the stage to say in a quivering voice that the play could not continue because 'the sun of England, the great tragedian Kean, has lost his mind'.

Aunt Marusya turned towards me, tapped me on the hand and tried to say something amusing, but instead screamed with surprise and leapt up out of her seat. Uncle Kolya also turned towards me and rose to his feet. The entire hall shook with applause. And then I turned round. Right behind me stood Father, as tired as ever and with the same sad, affectionate smile, but with his hair now completely grey. Everything began swimming before my eyes, and then, suddenly, went blank. Father caught me as I fell.

I remember poorly or, more accurately, don't remember at all, what happened next. I came to on a small sofa at the back of the box. I was lying down and my collar had been undone. Water was running down my chin, and Aunt Marusya was spritzing me with eau-de-Cologne. Father lifted me by the shoulders, sat me up, and kissed me.

'Just sit for a minute, don't try to move,' he said. 'It'll soon pass. Didn't you get my telegram?'

While an exhausted Orlenev took his bows and collected the bouquets that had been tossed on stage, Father told me briefly that he had found a job at the railway factory in Bezhitsa, a small town only eight kilometres from Bryansk. He had just arrived and, having found no one at home at Uncle Kolya's, had come to look for us at the theatre.

'How's Mama?' I asked.

'Mama?' he repeated, as if he hadn't quite heard. 'Oh, by the way, I brought you a letter from her. Mama doesn't want to live in Bezhitsa. She's moving to Moscow with Dima, she thinks for good. She's taking Galya too, of course.'

'Did she say anything about me?'

Father thought for a moment. 'I don't think so. I saw her only briefly. She must have written everything in her letter. Here, read it.'

He gave me the letter. The audience continued applauding. I read the letter quickly. It was short and dry.

Mama wrote that I was to stay with Uncle Kolya until she got settled. For now, there was nothing she could say to comfort me. She was planning to move to Moscow next month, in July. She wanted me to spend the summer in Bryansk, but if I wanted I could go and live with Father in Bezhitsa. Still, it would be better and easier if I were to stay in Bryansk. She added: 'Unfortunately, we can't stop in Bryansk on the way from Kiev to Moscow, but I'll send you a telegram on our way through so you can come and see us at the station and we'll talk everything over.'

After I had finished reading the letter, Aunt Marusya laughed and said to my father: 'And now, we won't give him up to anyone, not even to you, Georgy Maximovich.'

'Not for anything,' said Uncle Kolya. 'But don't worry, Georgy, we'll have a little chat about it.'

'Yes, we'll do that,' Father agreed.

We went out into the gardens. The glowing lamps hissed among the trees. Up on the bandstand, a military band pounded out with all its might a rousing march as though delighted the play was over and the musicians could go back to making as much noise as they liked. We climbed into our carriage. As we made our way down the steep hill, the horses picked their steps carefully.

Mama's letter left me disheartened. Things were no clearer now than they had been. Obviously, Mama

had not taken Father back. I couldn't understand why she had written me such a cold letter. Had she already started to forget me? Did no one at all want me? Father carried on a lively conversation with Uncle Kolya. But why was he ignoring me? There were so many troubling things I wanted to tell him. Perhaps if I could have told him and had a good cry I might have felt better.

Everyone loved me at Uncle Kolya's – my uncle, Aunt Marusya, all Uncle Kolya's friends, but still I always had this profound pain in my heart. I had to hide my sorrow so as not to hurt my aunt and uncle's feelings.

I remembered Suboch's words – that soon I could stop being a burden to anyone. The notion seized me. Everything was suddenly clear. In other words, I was a burden to everyone. Father had his own life. Who knows, maybe he was planning on living with someone in Bezhitsa. And Mama? Why had she accepted my leaving so easily? It must have been because of Galya. Galya was blind, the doctors could do nothing to help her. This had driven Mama to despair. She was completely consumed by Galya's terrible misfortune. She must have had nothing left in her soul besides her enormous pity for Galya.

A dusty moon hung over the town. Its light made the metal roofs look wet. Aunt Marusya leaned over to me. 'May I see the letter?'

I handed it to her. She folded it in half, slipped it into her glove, and then fastened the mother-of-pearl button over it.

My head started to ache. The pain was so bad it brought tears to my eyes.

'What's the matter?' asked Aunt Marusya.

'I've got a terrible headache.'

'You poor thing. It's all too much at once.'

At home they put me to bed. I lay there listening to the conversation in the dining room. I could hear my father's voice. I kept waiting for him to come in and wish me goodnight.

Fresh air from the window made me sleepy. Dozing off, I heard Orlenev cry out in a tormented voice just outside my room, 'The deer's been shot!' And then, all of a sudden, I heard faint music coming from far off, on the very edge of the night. It was leaving, drifting off into the distance, and it seemed as if it nodded farewell to me as it departed.

Then Aunt Marusya said: 'He's a weak boy. It's all been too much for him.'

I asked: 'For whom?'

'Sleep now,' said my aunt's voice. 'I'll be right by your side. Pour your own tea, why don't you.' Teaspoons began twirling in their cups, round and round, faster and faster. They made me giddy, and I began to feel myself falling. I fell for a long time and as I fell, I forgot everything.

I lay in bed with a fever and headache for several days. Meanwhile, Father left for Bezhitsa. As soon as I was well, Uncle Kolya and I left to visit Father. Bezhitsa was a dull and dreary factory settlement. The ground was littered with porous slag from the furnaces. The few birch trees were bent and crooked. Smoke belched from the factory chimney. Father lived in a crude log house that smelled of coal dust. His room was spartan. He lived here alone. We found him reading an encyclopedia. He was glad to see us.

'I understand,' he said to Uncle Kolya. 'This no place for Kostik. It's boring, uncomfortable and lonely. I won't last long here myself.'

'Well, what are you going to do?' asked my uncle sternly.

'Go somewhere else. My life just hasn't worked out, and I don't even care anymore. It's all my own fault.'

I looked at Father. This was no longer the man I knew from 1905 or before – at Gorodishche or Gelendzhik, or in Vrubel's hotel room. It was as if that had been my real father, and this was some double who had ruined his life.

[1] Pavel Orlenev (1869–1932), famed actor of the stage and early silent films.

[2] Alexandre Dumas's *Kean* (1836), on the life of the famed English actor Edmund Kean (1787–1833).

23

On My Own

Finally, the first signs of autumn arrived.

Behind Uncle Kolya's house there was an old apple orchard on a steep hillside. Lichen covered the hollow tree trunks and the rickety fence. I was one of the few who ever ventured into the orchard. I used to go there with my notebook, lie down in the grass and write poetry. As I now recall, the poems were bad, drenched in an indistinct melancholy. Busy ants hurried across the lines of my notebook, dragging along dead wasps; withered twigs dropped from the trees. The sky, strangely dense yet transparent, sparkled above the orchard. The wind swept the clouds from the sky and piled them up on the far side of the Desna. I tried to count them and got up to two hundred, but then everything became a blur in my eyes, and I gave up.

Autumn announced its arrival with a dry leaf falling quite unexpectedly on a bench and a small green caterpillar lowering itself on a thread onto my head.

I was sad to see summer go. Uncle Kolya had spent the summer in Bryansk, and I often visited him in the Arsenal, either at his laboratory or at the foundry workshop. I liked to watch the steam hammer at work. Standing at the hammer Staff Captain Ivanov told me of a celebrated blacksmith from the Obukhov works who could crack a walnut sitting on top of an upturned tumbler with a 1½-tonne steam hammer without cracking the glass. I liked everything about the Arsenal – the low buildings dating back to the time of Catherine the Great, the courtyards overgrown with weeds and cluttered with iron castings, the lilac bushes along the workshop walls, the shiny, oily copper cylinders of old steam engines, the smell of alcohol in the laboratories, the bearded blacksmiths, the smelters, and the fountain of bluish artesian water bubbling up from a well by the Arsenal's outer wall.

I had to say goodbye to all this, to Bryansk, to Uncle Kolya's cosy home, and perhaps for a long time.

That autumn I was to return to Kiev. This had been decided at a brief family meeting at the Bryansk railway station when Mama, Galya and Dima passed through on the way to Moscow. I had gone to the station with Uncle Kolya and Aunt Marusya to see Mama. Mama looked much older, and she spoke with Uncle Kolya in an apologetic tone, as if she felt she had to justify herself in his eyes. Galya was almost completely blind by now. And her hearing was beginning to go as well. She wore thick, heavy glasses. When someone spoke to her, she stared hard for a long time trying to make out who it was and would then reply with strange, irrelevant answers. Dima was sullen and silent.

Mama gave me a hug and looked me up and down from head to toe. She said that I looked much better than I had in Kiev. She sounded offended. I said that I wanted to return to Kiev and that I'd been readmitted to my old school. I'd live with Borya and earn my keep by giving lessons. Mama said that she very much wanted to take me with her to Moscow but that it simply wasn't possible. She had no idea how she was going to get on herself, let alone care for me. The whole time Galya kept saying: 'Kostik, where are you? Oh, there you are! I can't see you at all.'

Aunt Marusya, talking very fast, said it was madness to allow me to go to Kiev and that while she perhaps didn't understand a thing about the matter and didn't have the right to stick her nose into our family business, nevertheless . . . She stopped talking after catching sight of Uncle Kolya's disapproving expression. She looked out of the train's compartment window at the platform. Her eyes were dark with anger.

'Finally!' Mama said. 'Better late than never.'

Father was walking up the platform. He had just arrived on the workers' train from Bezhitsa. The black jacket he was wearing was shiny with age. Father entered the train just as the second whistle blew. We began to say our goodbyes. Father kissed my mother's hand and said: 'Marusya, I'll take care of Kostik. I'll send him enough for his living expenses every month.'

'Let's hope so!' said Mama. 'Try to manage this one little thing – I beg of you.'

Dima parted with Father coldly. Galya, like a blind woman, groped for his face with her hand. Father turned so white it seemed even his eyes lost all their colour.

The third whistle blew. We exited the carriage onto the platform. Leaning out of the window, Mama promised to come and visit me in Kiev in the winter. The train began to move. Father stood holding his

hat and watching the train's turning wheels. He didn't want to go back with us to Uncle Kolya's and made some excuse about an urgent job in Bezhitsa that meant he had to catch the very first train back.

We rode home in the carriage. Neither Uncle Kolya nor Aunt Marusya said a word. Aunt Marusya sat nibbling the edge of a small handkerchief and then finally looked over at Uncle Kolya and said: 'No, I still don't understand. How can they do this?'

Uncle Kolya stopped her with a frown and a glance in my direction. I felt ashamed of our family troubles and how they were spoiling not only our own lives. I dreamed of escaping to Kiev as quickly as possible and of forgetting these misfortunes. Better to be alone than to live in this tiresome and confusing mess of mutual pain and suffering.

I waited for August when I'd be leaving for Kiev. It finally arrived, together with falling leaves and sullen rains. On the day of my departure the wind drove a hard rain that lashed the carriages of the Moscow–Kiev line. Father did not come to see me off, even though he had promised he would. At the station, Uncle Kolya tried to lighten the mood with banter. Aunt Marusya slipped an envelope into my coat pocket and said: 'Read it on the way.' When the train began to move, she turned away. Uncle Kolya took her by the arm and turned her round. She smiled at me, but then turned her back to the train again.

The raindrops running down the window made it impossible to see. I lowered the window and leaned out. Uncle Kolya and Aunt Marusya were still there on the platform watching the train depart. Steam was settling on the ground. Far off behind the train I could see a strip of clear sky. There the sun had come out. I took this as a good omen. I pulled the envelope out of my pocket. Inside was money and a note:

> Look after yourself. You are heading out now into life all on your own, and so don't forget you have an uncle and an aunt here in the provinces. They love you very much and are always ready to help.

24

Diky Lane

Borya was still living in a furnished room at the Progress boarding house on dirty Zhilyanskaya Street near the station. He greeted me warmly, and as if he wanted to be my protector.

'Good for you', he said, 'for deciding to stand on your own two feet. Come and live with me for a while, and then we'll find something better for you. You won't want to live here.'

'Why?'

'You'll see.'

I saw quite soon. After Borya left for the Polytechnical Institute, a puffy-looking young man with a face like sauerkraut appeared in his room. Hanging on him were a dusty student's jacket and green trousers with baggy knees. His bulging, empty eyes slowly took in the room, the shelf laden with food, and me.

'Count Potocki,' the puffy man introduced himself. 'Your brother's closest friend. Former student at the Polytechnical Institute. Forced to leave due to an incurable illness.'

'What's wrong with you?' I asked sympathetically.

'My illness cannot be described,' replied Count Potocki as he proceeded to grab a handful of Borya's cigarettes from a box on the table. 'My suffering is beyond words. Due to my illness Professor Paton failed me in my exams for three years running. Do you know Paton?'

'No.'

'A savage beast,' said Count Potocki, taking a whole sausage from the table, giving it a quick inspection and then slipping it into his pocket. 'The foe of every last person seeking success. The only medicine that offers me any relief is ordinary creosote. My parents are late with my allowance and so quite understandably I've run out of money and can't go to buy more at the chemist's. Any chance you might consider it?'

'Consider what?' I asked, puzzled.

'All right, all right!' said Count Potocki with a good-natured smile. 'Enough fooling around. I had wanted to ask Borya for three roubles but I missed him. Perhaps you might have a little green one on you?'

'Yes, of course!' I dived into my pocket and pulled out my money. 'Three roubles, you said?'

'Oh, my dear young man!' exclaimed a disappointed Potocki. 'If a lout asks to borrow money, he always asks for more than he needs, but if it's an honest fellow, he asks for less. Were I, God forbid, a lout, I would have asked for twenty roubles. But I've asked for only three! You may well ask, where does the truth lie in this matter? As always, truth lies in the middle. Twenty minus three makes seventeen. We divide seventeen by two and get eight and a half. A little bit of rounding and we're left with ten. Simple and easy.'

I held out my hand with the ten roubles. He took them in such a strange way that I didn't even notice how they ended up in his hand – they just seemed to vanish in the air. While we'd been talking the door kept creaking. But as soon as the money had vanished, the door flew open and a little woman in a dressing gown raced into the room. With every step her slippers gave the floor a mighty slap. They were too big for her.

'Why?' she screamed in a strange voice. 'Why are you giving money to this monster? Hand it over!' she hissed, grabbing Count Potocki by his jacket.

She tore the sleeve clean off. The count escaped and raced into the hall, the woman close behind, her heels firing like pistols.

'Hand it over!' she cried. 'If only three roubles! Or just two!'

But the count was too fast for her, and he slid down the stairs out into the street and was gone. The woman in the dressing gown slumped against the wall and began to sob in an unnatural, unpleasant sort of way. Lodgers began poking their heads out of every door. This allowed me to see them all at once. A pimply youth fixing a pink celluloid collar to his purple shirt stepped out.

'Madame Humenyuk,' he instructed, 'take measures!'

The proprietress of the Progress boarding house, Madame Humenyuk, a stout woman with tender, languid eyes, appeared in the hall. She approached the woman in the dressing gown and said to her in a

clear and wicked voice: ‘March! Back to your room! Stop this ruckus or I’ll call the police, upon my word of honour as a woman!’

The woman quietly returned to her room. The hallway hummed for quite some time with chatter about the affair of Count Potocki. When Borya arrived I told him everything. He commented that I had got off cheaply and told me to be more careful in the future. Count Potocki was no count and no former student, but a law clerk who’d been fired for drunkenness.

‘They’re afraid of me,’ Borya remarked, ‘but given your character you’d be wise to steer clear of them. This place is full of riff-raff.’

‘Why do you live here then?’

‘I’m used to it. And they know not to bother me.’

A month later Borya found me a room with full board at the home of old Pani Kozlovskaya, an acquaintance of Mother’s in Diky Lane. I received some money from my father and reckoned that even if he didn’t send me any more I had enough for three months before I’d need to start giving lessons.

No one lived in the flat with Pani Kozlovskaya other than her son, Romuald, a lieutenant in the infantry. The flat was cramped, the floors sticky from cheap paint. The windows looked out onto a barren garden in which all but two or three trees had been chopped down. In the winter they flooded it to make a small skating rink. Fir saplings were sunk into the snowbanks around the edge of the ice. They quickly turned yellow. It was a cheap rink, used only by the little boys from Glubochitsa and Lvovskaya Streets. It didn’t even have a band, just a gramophone with a giant purple horn.

Diky – ‘wild’, that is – Lane truly was wild. It led nowhere, petering out into wasteland buried under snowdrifts and piles of ash that emitted greyish wisps of smoke. This land always smelled of something burning. I decorated my closet of a room with portraits of Byron, Lermontov and Hugo. In the evenings I’d light the kitchen lamp, which fell only on the desk and the portrait of Hugo. The bearded writer sat, sadly resting his head on a hand extending from a round starched cuff, and gazed at me, as if to say: ‘Well, young man, now what are you going to do?’ I was enthralled at the time with Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. More than the story of the novel itself, I loved especially old Hugo’s furious excursions into history.

I managed to read a great deal that winter. I simply could not get used to my loneliness, and books helped me to escape it. I frequently recalled our life on Nikolsko-Botanicheskaya Street, Lena, the cheerful artillerymen, fireworks in the old park at Rëvny, Bryansk. I had always been surrounded by lots of interesting and kind people. Now I felt nothing but a humanless void. The lamp hissed strangely, and this sound intensified my loneliness.

But a month passed, then another, and I experienced a change. I began to notice that the worse reality appeared, the more fully I could find all the good that was hidden inside it. I was beginning to realise that in life the good and the bad lie side by side. The good can often shine through a fog of lies, poverty and suffering, just as at the end of some rainy days the fire of the setting sun can pierce the grey clouds with its rays. I tried to find signs of the good everywhere. And, of course, I often did find them. They might shine unexpectedly, like Cinderella’s glass slipper peeping from under the tattered, grey hem of her dress or like the attentive, tender gaze of her eyes meeting mine in some street. ‘’Tis I,’ this gaze said, ‘did you truly not recognise me? Now I’m a pauper covered in rags, but all I need to do is take them off and I’ll become a princess. Life is full of the unexpected. Believe me. Don’t be afraid.’

Such muddled notions filled my head that winter. I was just starting out on the road before me but was certain I already knew where it would lead. I was struck by some lines of Fet that appeared to capture what lay ahead: ‘Out of the realm of blizzards, ice and snow, how fresh and pure your month of May springs forth.’

I would read these lines aloud. Pani Kozlovskaya listened from the other side of the wall. Lieutenant Romuald always returned late or sometimes not at all. Pani Kozlovskaya was lonely and so glad of the sound of any human voice.

25

Autumn Battles

Back at school both the teachers and my schoolmates gave me as warm a welcome as I had received from Borya. Even Father Tregubov expressed some fitting words about the return of the prodigal son. Suboch cross-examined me about my living arrangements and promised to set me up with lessons within the month. Inspector Bodyansky emitted the terrifying snort that he used to frighten the swarm and said: 'Guilty, but with extenuating circumstances. Off to class with you but stay out of trouble!'

Somehow I still managed to get into trouble again.

Every form in our school was divided into two sections. The first was considered 'aristocratic', the other 'democratic'. Those in the first section were mainly blockheads – the sons of generals, wealthy landowners, prominent officials and financiers. In our second section were the sons of the intelligentsia, middle-class types, Jews and Poles. The division was clearly deliberate and ordained from above.

The hostility between the first and second sections was constant and expressed itself in mutual disdain. Every autumn a battle was traditionally fought between the two sections involving every boy except for the swarmers and those in the top form. These were already considered adults, almost university students, and so brawling seemed by now beneath them. It was only once in a great while that the battles did not take place.

The date of the battle changed every year, which we did to throw off the watchful school authorities. Nevertheless, they somehow managed to guess when the big day was approaching and then they began to worry and resort to all manner of tricks to try to avert the bloody clash: without warning they would dismiss the entire form suspected of instigating the brawl immediately after the first period of the day, or they would send two or three forms at the same time on a trip to the local art gallery, or they suddenly locked all the doors to the garden, our favourite place for the fight. But none of their cunning ploys worked. The battle always occurred on the appointed day and always during the midday break.

Some of the boys were 'exempted' from the fighting. Namely, the sick, the weak and those who couldn't stomach the day-to-day pushing and shoving, let alone organised violence. Exemptions were freely granted, and no one was made to feel bad about it. I was one of those boys exempted for that last reason. We were required to remove our uniform sashes to signal our neutral status. According to the iron rules of school warfare, no one was permitted to touch a boy without a sash. Nevertheless, we preferred not to even venture out into the garden, but to watch the battle from inside. You could see it better from the classroom windows.

A sudden deadly silence marked the beginning of the battle. In the blink of an eye, the corridors emptied as the schoolboys raced to the garden. Then came a menacing, muffled roar. Upon hearing this, Inspector Bodyansky turned white and crossed himself. Through the clouds of dust raised by the attacking formations, volleys of chestnuts whistled like grapeshot. All the proctors – Kazimir, Maxim (a.k.a. 'Cold Water') and a few others – tore into the garden, a jostling crowd of terrified supervisors right behind them. Doors slammed. The corridors echoed with the agitated voices of teachers.

Throwing on his coat and pulling his cockaded hat down tight on his head, Inspector Bodyansky ran down the stairs as he hurried to the battlefield. Once Father Olendsky, the Catholic priest, came racing after Bodyansky into the garden. We climbed up onto the windowsills. We wanted to see Olendsky raise his crucifix aloft and appeal to the warring sides to lay down their weapons. But instead, Olendsky rolled up the sleeves of his cassock and then began to pull the combatants apart and fling them left and right. He did this with amazing dexterity and ease, literally tossing the boys aside as if they were balls. No doubt Olendsky was reliving his childhood. Huffing and puffing, the good father returned to the teachers' common room. His shining red face left no doubt that participating in this battle, even if only as a peacemaker, had given him enormous satisfaction.

As soon as the fighting erupted, the proctors and supervisors threw open all the doors to the garden. It was one of their cunning military tactics. By opening the doors, they could then divide the boys into small groups and drive them back into the school.

'It's begun at the First Gymnasium!' the street boys yelled.

From the windows it was difficult to tell just what had begun and what was happening. Dirt flew,

branches shook. There came shouts and dull thuds, as if two herds of elephants were trampling each other. Then, at long last, obliterating all else and resounding through the long corridors, there arose the cry of victory that swelled in a tumultuous, roaring crescendo. This meant that the second section had won, and the first had been forced to beat a hasty retreat. As best I recall, the first section never won.

Almost always in the front rank of the victors was a boy with a pert snub nose – the future writer Mikhail Bulgakov. He rushed into battle where the fighting was at its most dangerous. Victory followed him, crowning him with a golden wreath of his own dishevelled hair. The blockheads from the first section were afraid of Bulgakov and tried to slander him. After one battle they began a rumour that Bulgakov had violated the established rules of combat by using his metal belt buckle as a knuckle-duster. No one believed this lie, however, not even Inspector Bodyansky.

I myself took part in this particular battle because I had a score to settle with a boy by the name of Khavin, the son of a broker on the Kiev stock exchange. He was tall and gangly and loved to use the word ‘sacramental’ in practically every sentence even though he sounded ridiculous given his pronounced burr. On his trips to the theatre, he would blow languid kisses to the girls. He rode to school in his own carriage and pair and had nothing but contempt for us plebeians.

The cause of the affair was Pani Kozlovskaya. The old lady could barely see and was afraid to go out. I escorted her to church almost every Sunday. She felt badly about causing me so much trouble and, blushing like a young girl, was forever apologising. I usually led her by the arm to keep her from bumping into the other pedestrians. Lieutenant Romuald took my place on occasion, but only rarely. I suspected he was ashamed of his aged mother, of her old-fashioned clothes, her helplessness. At any rate, most Sundays the lieutenant was ‘devilishly busy’. On one of those Sunday mornings I was accompanying Pani Kozlovskaya to church along Mikhailovskaya Street. We came face to face with Khavin. Raising an eyebrow, he gave me a look of scornful amazement. Next, Khavin slowly looked Pani Kozlovskaya up and down, after which he grinned, snapped his fingers, whistled and walked on.

When the battle began, I rushed to the garden. Khavin was standing off to the side. He was not wearing a sash, and neither was I. Both of us had been ‘exempted’. Nevertheless I walked straight up to Khavin and slapped him in the face. He let out a strange squeak. Supervisor Dolt grabbed me by the arm. The next day Inspector Bodyansky summoned me.

‘What is all this?’ he asked. ‘I might understand had you been fighting according to the established rules just like the rest of you wild animals, but to go and slap someone out of the blue! Whatever for?’

‘I had my reasons, Pavel Petrovich. You know I’ve never fought before in my life.’

‘Yes, yes, quite true! But now you risk having to pay school fees in the second half of the year. Why did you hit him?’

I dug in my heals and didn’t want to say anything more. ‘It was worth it. You may or may not believe me, Pavel Petrovich, but that’s all I’m going to tell you.’

‘Fine, I believe you,’ said Bodyansky. ‘Now go! May this all simply be forgotten.’

After every battle Bodyansky and the director had to have unpleasant conversations with the school board and the parents of the beaten blockheads.

‘This is all the result of your having no respect for authority,’ Bodyansky would tell us angrily after these conversations. ‘You’ve been reading too much Ibsen and Leonid Andreev,[1] that’s the problem! Enlightened youth! Future pillars of society! Ha! Savages and troglodytes, that’s what you are!’

[1] Leonid Andreev (1871–1919), writer and playwright known for his dark pessimism.

26

'Living' Languages

The only 'dead' language we learned at school was Latin. This was our main subject. It was taught by our form master, Vladimir Fadeevich Suboch, who looked like a tall, thin tomcat with long, spiky whiskers. He was a kind man and we liked him, even though he would spring devastating Latin tests on us without warning. Bodyansky also paid close attention to our progress in Latin and repeatedly said: 'Latin is the greatest phenomenon in the history of world languages!'

Greek was not obligatory. Only a few of the boys took it. It was taught by an old Czech covered in tobacco ash by the name of Pospíšil, which to us Russian speakers sounded like 'Mr Hurry'. He shuffled slowly down the corridors on his weak puffy legs and was always late for class. And so instead of 'Mr Hurry', we called him '*Opozdal*', 'Mr Late'.

Of the 'living' languages, we learned French and German. These were boring lessons. The Frenchman, Serremout, who had a withered arm and a little reddish beard from the era of King Henry IV,[1] always carried under his arm several large oleographs that he liked to hang on the wall.

The oleographs depicted the contented rural life of villagers from some unknown country during the various seasons of the year. In spring men in straw hats decorated with brightly coloured ribbons ploughed the earth, while their wives, rouged and dressed in tight laced bodices, fed yellow chickens. In summer the men mowed and danced around the haystacks, waving branches of dog-rose. In autumn they threshed grain in front of cottages that resembled children's toys, while in winter they skated on a frozen river, apparently for lack of anything better to do. Nevertheless, these pictures of villagers were much more interesting than others that depicted boring geometrical rooms devoid of furniture but featuring a cat playing with a ball of wool.

Serremout hung up the oleographs, took a pointer with his good arm, drew our attention to the villagers dancing with their scythes or to the cat, and asked in his thunderous voice: 'What do we see in this interesting picture?'

We answered all together in French that in this interesting picture we clearly see *braves paysans* or a tiny kitten playing with a nice old lady's ball of wool. This business with the pictures dragged on for two years until one day the inspector replaced Serremout with a new teacher, Monsieur Gobas.

Monsieur Gobas had just arrived in Russia, and he didn't know a word of the language. Ours was the first lesson he gave in this enigmatic country. Monsieur Gobas was from Brittany. He was a short, round little man, so indifferent to life that he could not even be bothered to get angry with us.

The inspector introduced us to Monsieur Gobas and left. Then Régamé, a French boy in our class, stood up and in exquisite Parisian dialect respectfully informed Monsieur Gobas that in Russia it was customary to say a prayer before every lesson. Monsieur Gobas smiled politely, apparently accepting this as one of those native eccentricities which every country possesses.

Littauer got up next. He was a Jew but knew the Russian Orthodox liturgy quite well. He went over and stood before the icon, crossed himself with a flourish, and began the 'Prayer before Studies': 'O Gracious Lord, we pray to thee, send us the blessing of thy Holy Spirit, enriching and strengthening the power of our souls.' He recited this prayer five times, then he recited the Great Litany. Following that, Littauer proceeded to the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the prayer of St Ephraim Sirin. Monsieur Gobas stood there politely, his head bowed and looking puzzled.

'O Lord, Master of my life,' intoned Littauer, 'deliver us from sloth, despondency, ambition and idle chatter!'

We repeated his words in unison, keeping an eye on the clock. Only ten minutes of class time remained. We worried that Littauer's knowledge of the liturgy might run out before the ten minutes were up. But Littauer didn't let us down. He recited the Creed a second time and then ended the lesson by singing: 'O Lord, save thy people.'

The bell rang, and Monsieur Gobas shrugged faintly and left for the teachers' common room. A ray of sun glinted off his black frock coat as it sailed away down the hall. We broke out laughing behind the cover of the raised lids of our desks, but in no time Inspector Bodyansky stormed in, panting: 'Tomfoolery! Blasphemy! How dare you, you bunch of louts! Who organised this little prayer service?

Was it you, Littauer?'

'What? Me?' exclaimed Littauer, getting to his feet. 'But I'm a Jew, Pavel Petrovich.'

'Oi-oi-oi!' said Bodyansky. 'A Jew! An interesting line of reasoning. Am I to believe that if you made the sign of the cross your arm would fall off ? Gather up your books and go home. Along the way you might ponder the sad fact that this is your second failing mark in conduct.'

With Monsieur Gobas we plunged into the jungle of irregular verbs and conjugations. The noble French language became a tangled labyrinth of rules. We lost our way in the thickets of all those mysterious accents – *l'accent aigu*, *l'accent grave*, *l'accent circonflexe*. Gradually we began to think of the living language of Flaubert and Hugo as something distinct and separate from what Monsieur Gobas was teaching us.

With each passing year we loved French literature that much more and worked ever harder to read it in the original. We began to study the language on our own or hired private tutors, having lost all hope in this phlegmatic Breton. Yet he kept on conjugating and declining mindlessly as he stared out of the window at the falling Russian snow. His eyes gave away nothing except a longing to be alone by a warm fireplace. We asked him about Balzac and Dumas, about Hugo and Daudet, but he pretended not to hear or told us that these were writers for adults and not Russian schoolboys who still didn't know the difference between *le futur* and *le conditionnel*.

In time we learned that Monsieur Gobas had a small stone house in a Breton village where his old mother bred rabbits and he had come to Russia solely to earn a bit of money in a few years' time and then retire and return home to his mother and grow mushrooms that he would be able to sell for a considerable profit in Paris. This explained why he had no interest in Russia or French literature.

Only once did Monsieur Gobas have a talk with us from the heart. It was a spring day. He was preparing to leave, to spend the summer holidays in Brittany. This explained his relaxed mood. He joked in a morose way how man had been created for a quiet life. For this reason, one must always follow the rules and be content with little. He then told us how as a boy he had caught lobsters with his grandfather. He sighed and fell silent as if lost in thought. Through the window we could see the chestnut trees in full bloom. The soft, fresh air of spring filled the corridors and caressed our faces. A sad Monsieur Gobas looked out of the window and shook his head – life had cast him out into an alien world like a ladybird blown by a strong wind from a green leaf. And all because he was poor, and this dreary labour was the only way he could scrape together enough to guarantee a peaceful old age.

'Well,' he said, 'that's life! We mustn't curse and moan. Patience is its own reward. Isn't that so?'

No one said anything because at that time we were convinced that patience was the same thing as stupidity.

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Many years later I told my friend the writer Arkady Gaidar[2] how Serremout had taught us French with his oleographs. Gaidar was delighted because that was how he had learned French. Memories came back to him, and for several days in a row he talked to me of nothing but Serremout's teaching method. We were living at the time near Ryazan and enjoyed going for long walks and fishing in the nearby lakes.

'What do we see in this picture?' he would ask in French and then, before I could say a word, answer himself: 'We see an unwelcoming village and two poor travellers shaking its dust from their boots. We see the villagers who refuse to exchange with the travellers three eggs for a handful of tobacco.'

On the train back to Moscow somewhere along the little-travelled line between Tuma and Vladimir, Gaidar woke me in the middle of the night and asked: 'What do we see in this interesting picture?'

I couldn't see a thing because the flickering candle in the lamp was sending long shadows up and down the carriage.

'We see,' Gaidar explained, 'a railway thief pinching a pair of warm felt boots known in Russia as "*valenki*" from the basket of a nice old lady.'

With these words, Gaidar – a good-natured giant of a man – jumped down from the upper berth, grabbed a nimble fellow in a checked cap by the collar, took the *valenki* from him, and said: 'Get lost! And you'd better hope I never lay eyes on you again!'

The frightened thief ran to the door and jumped from the moving train. This was, I'm certain, the only practical application ever of Monsieur Serremout's method.

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Our German lessons were more interesting, and not because Oskar Fëdorovich Johanson was a model teacher, but because sometimes we got to occupy ourselves with matters far removed from the German

language. Most of all this involved Oskar Fëdorovich asking us to make copies of his operatic score 'The Spirit of Tokay Wine'.

Johanson was a nervous old Viennese. He came to class with a sawn-off leg from a wooden chair. When the noise in the class became unbearable, Johanson grabbed the chair leg and banged it on his desk with all his might. Order was restored immediately. Johanson was a knowledgeable music lover. He had planned to become a composer, but some obscure chapter in his life had destroyed his dream and so, with disgust, he turned to teaching. His demands of us were minimal. If one of us failed an exam, Johanson would stare at the boy for a long time over his pince-nez, sigh, and then slowly write down the lowest possible passing mark in his book.

Once, when I was in the sixth form, Johanson left his opera score on the tram. It was his only copy. He put an advertisement in the local newspaper, but no one returned the score. Johanson stayed away from school for a whole week and when he returned, we hardly recognised him – he was grey in the face and had a torn scarf wrapped around his yellow neck. The silence in the classroom that day was deathly.

'Well, young men,' he began, 'it's all over! That opera was my whole life's work. Writing it kept me young. With every page I could feel the clock move back in time. Yes, it's true! It was the music of happiness. That's what I was writing about. And where is it, this happiness, you ask? It's all around us! It's in the wind in the trees. In the oak leaves, in the smell of wine barrels. In the songs of the birds, in women's voices. It's here, there and everywhere. I dreamed of becoming a wandering musician, not a man forced to wear this teacher's uniform. I envied the Gypsies. I wished to perform at village weddings and in a woodsman's cottage. For lovers and the lonely, for heroes and poets, for those who have been lied to but still not lost their faith in human goodness. All this was in my opera. Everything! I thought I could die a contented man having seen it performed on the stage of the Vienna Opera. Perhaps, I thought, my friend, the old poet Altenberg, would come, take his seat in one of the velvet chairs, looking like a big teddy bear, and tears would pour from his eyes.[3] For me this would have been the greatest reward. And perhaps my music would even be heard by her, she who had never believed in my talents . . .'

Johanson beheld his thin fingers as he spoke. He seemed intoxicated with grief. He always spoke in a flowery, theatrical sort of way, but now we didn't notice. We just sat there, our eyes staring at the floor.

During the break Suboch came to speak to us. 'I wanted to warn you', he said as we gathered around him, 'to be particularly considerate towards Oskar Fëdorovich. Although I expect you already knew this yourselves.'

That same day the call went out to every form in our gymnasium: 'Find the opera! Find it no matter what!' I don't know who issued the call. It reached everyone by word of mouth. We broke into groups to discuss our search plans like a bunch of conspirators. We seethed with impatience to get started.

The hunt began. We questioned all the tram conductors, we visited the markets. We searched the shopkeepers' stacks of wrapping paper. Finally, the score was found at the Lukyanovsky Market. A boy from the eighth form had discovered it. A market woman had tried to use the sheets to wrap lard, but her customers complained that the ink smeared all over the lard and so she had to find some other paper. Thanks to this, only three pages were missing. The boys in the eighth form returned the manuscript to Johanson, and so we did not get to witness it. We only saw how he walked down the corridor after class surrounded by the older boys. He was not wearing his pince-nez. He was stumbling and swaying from side to side. The boys were supporting him. Inspector Bodyansky was standing in the doorway to the teachers' common room, smiling and nodding. He folded Johanson into his arms and they kissed.

Several days of music madness followed in our school. Johanson brought in his opera score and fresh music paper. He handed the paper out to us, and we sat down and made several copies of the opera for him.

This was in late winter, and in the spring I received in the mail a formal invitation stating that Oskar Fëdorovich Johanson requested 'the honour of my presence' at the performance of selections from his opera, which was to take place at the home of one of my classmates. I arrived on the appointed evening at my friend's house on Bibikovsky Boulevard. The formal staircase was brightly lit, and the two large drawing rooms were crowded with guests. Most of them were boys from our school, but there were girls from the Mariinskaya Gymnasium as well, along with some grey-haired musicians and actors. Johanson had yet to arrive. I stood by the entrance to the main room and looked down the staircase. Suddenly, Oskar Fëdorovich appeared. He bolted up the stairs looking slim and youthful in his elegant black frock coat. He strode into the drawing room. Everyone applauded.

The music, performed by a string quartet and piano, began all at once. It truly was music of happiness or rather of the joys and sorrows of lovers, worthy of Tristan and Isolde. I am incapable of conveying the beauty and melodic power of his music. After the concert most of the guests congratulated Johanson and

left, while those of us who remained were invited to dinner. Late that night we accompanied Johanson home. He stopped along the way at the telegraph office to send a cable to Vienna. He came out looking a bit sad and said that he had waited too long for this happy day to come. And when you wait too long for happiness, it somehow turns into a kind of sorrow.

[1] Henry IV of France (1553–1610), reigned 1589–1610.

[2] Arkady Golikov (pen name Gaidar) (1904–41), writer chiefly of children's stories.

[3] Peter Altenberg (1859–1919), influential Viennese writer and poet.

27

'Gentlemen Schoolboys'

Who could have known what was to become of us 'gentlemen schoolboys', as Bodyansky called us? What would we youths in our faded caps, always ready for any sort of prank, joke or fight, make of our lives? What, for example, would come of Bulgakov? No one could have known.

Bulgakov was older than me, but I remember well his extraordinary vitality, his ruthless tongue feared by all, and his aura of determination and strength – we felt it in everything he did and said, however trifling. Bulgakov loved tall tales and practical jokes, he loved pulling your leg. He managed to take our tired school life and transform it into a strange world filled with incredible people and events. Any colourless character, such as Supervisor Dolt, once caught up in the circle of Bulgakov's playful inventiveness, would grow to become something much larger along the lines of a Sobakevich or a Tartarin de Tarascon.[1] He began to lead a mysterious double life, nothing like the Dolt we knew with his bulbous alcoholic nose, but the hero of absurd and monstrous happenings. With his fictions Bulgakov displaced that real, recognisable world around us and shifted it ever so slightly over the edge into the realm of the phantasmagorical.

After leaving school I didn't see Bulgakov again until 1924 when he was already an established writer. His connection to Kiev had remained. In his play *The Days of the Turbins* I recognised our school's vestibule and Proctor Maxim 'Cold Water', that honest and boring old man. I could practically hear the autumn wind rustling our Kiev chestnut trees in the theatre's wings.

I went to school with several boys who later became well-known writers, actors and playwrights. Kiev has always had a passion for the theatre. Was it an accident that over a short time our school produced so many people who found their way to literature and theatre? I don't think so. (When we were 'accidentally' late to class, Suboch would say to us that there was nothing accidental in life other than death. After uttering this statement, Suboch would give the latecomers the lowest possible passing mark in comportment.) Of course, this was no accident. The reasons for this fact were so many and so difficult to easily discern that we, given our laziness, didn't want to go to the trouble of looking deeply into matters and preferred to think that it all happened due to some happy coincidence.

We forget those teachers who inculcated in us a love of culture, we forget Kiev's magnificent theatres, we forget that each and every one of us was enthralled by philosophy and poetry, and we forget that during our youth Chekhov and Tolstoy, Serov and Levitan, Scriabin and Komissarzhevskaya were all still alive.[2]

We forget the revolution of 1905, the student meetings we boys sneaked off to, the adults' arguments we overheard, and we forget that Kiev had always had its own revolutionary fervour. We forget how we inhaled Plekhanov, Chernyshevsky[3] and all those revolutionary pamphlets printed on cheap grey paper bearing slogans like 'Proletarians of the World, Unite!' and 'Land and Freedom.' We read Herzen and Kropotkin, *The Communist Manifesto* and the novels of the revolutionary Kravchinsky.[4] Disorderly though it was, this reading bore its fruits.

We forget the famous Idzikovskaya Library on Kreshchatik, the symphony concerts, Kiev's parks, the bright and crisp autumn days, the noble solemnity of Latin which accompanied us throughout our school years. We forget the Dnieper, the mild foggy winters, and rich, gentle Ukraine which embraced the city with its fields of buckwheat, its thatched roofs and beehives.

It is difficult to say exactly how these many various things influenced us in our youth, but they did. They imposed a distinctive poetic structure on our thoughts and feelings.

We immersed ourselves in reading. Our understanding of Russian literature, with all its classical clarity and depth, came to us later than that of the West. We were young, and Western literature attracted us with its elegance, its calm and its perfection of design. The cool transparency of Mérimée was easier for us than the torments of Dostoevsky. Mérimée, like Flaubert, was as clear as a summer morning, whereas Dostoevsky descended like a thunderstorm and made us run for cover. We found that same freedom from doubt in Dickens, in Hugo and Balzac. It's possible that the 'Universal Library' was responsible for our passion for Western literature. Those cheap little yellow books flooded the bookshops. For twenty kopecks you could read anything from *Mont Oriol* and *Eugénie Grandet*, to *The Wild Duck* or *The*

Charterhouse of Parma. We tore through them all.

For a while we were especially carried away by French poetry – Verlaine, Leconte de Lisle and Théophile Gauthier. We read them in the original and in translation. Their French, at times almost as elusive as some distant scent, at others as hard as steel, cast a magical spell over us. We loved this poetry not only for its melody and vague mistiness, as light as the haze on a spring day, but also since it evoked in us an image of the poets themselves, and of Paris. This poetry was but one of many enchanting things about Paris. Slate roofs, broad boulevards, rain, streetlights, the Pantheon, a rose-coloured night sky over the Seine, and, finally, poetry. Out of such things did we construct our naïve impression of Paris, and it was as inconceivable without poetry as it was without barricades and kisses.

It was not long, however, before this poetry paled for me beside the rich gold mine of the Russian poetic tradition –

> The forest sheds its crimson dress,
> The frost casts silver upon the withered field . . .

We grew, and gradually Russian literature, perhaps the greatest in the world, possessed our hearts and relegated the literature of the West to a less prominent though still honoured place.

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We are also passionate about painting. There hung in the Assembly Hall a marble plaque of honour with the names engraved in gold lettering of those graduates who had earned some distinction or become famous. Among them was the painter Ge.[5] We disliked old Ge for his gloomy style and moralising tone. At the time a delayed vogue for Impressionism was taking hold.

My classmate Emma Shmukler was preparing to become an artist. He studied painting under the Kiev impressionist Manievich.[6] I loved Manievich's paintings – village huts and gardens, painted in bold strokes, almost as if he worked with a palette knife.

I often visited Shmukler. Theirs was, as we used to say, an artistic home. His father was a well-known physician who often treated patients for free. In his youth he had dreams of becoming an opera singer, but for some reason this did not work out. Nevertheless, opera remained his life's great passion. Everything in their house spoke of the opera – not only the doctor himself, a heavy-set, clean-shaven man with a booming voice, but the grand piano, the handwritten scores on the stand, the jardinières awaiting floral tributes, the portraits of celebrated singers, and the mother-of-pearl opera glasses. Even the constant noise in the house spoke of the opera. The shouting, the heated arguments – all of it sounded like roulades and recitatives, duets and trios that began at *moderato* and then swelled from *allegro* to *forte* in clashing arias for male, female and children's voices. There was a distinct melody hidden among all the noise. The Shmuklers' voices had a clear, free ring to them like *bel canto*, and they carried out of the flat, echoing through the hall and cascading down the front staircase.

Although I visited their home often, I preferred the small rented room of another classmate, the Pole Fitsovsky. Like me, he lived alone. A stocky boy with a lock of chestnut hair falling down his forehead, he was imperturbable and regarded everything as a pointless fuss. He had a number of eccentricities which upset the teachers. For example, he had a habit of always talking to Stanishevsky, a happy-go-lucky boy who sat next to him, in pure Russian but in such a way no one could understand a word he was saying. The reason was quite simple. Fitsovsky spoke extremely fast and always accented the wrong syllable in every word.

Fitsovsky forced me to learn Esperanto. This language, invented by the Warsaw oculist Zamenhof, had a single merit – it was easy. Many newspapers were published in Esperanto in various countries. What I found interesting in these newspapers were the lists of addresses for people who wished to correspond with others in Esperanto. Inspired by Fitsovsky's example, I began corresponding with a few Esperantists in Britain, France, Canada and even Uruguay. I sent them picture postcards of Kiev and in return received cards with views of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paris, Montevideo and Quebec. Gradually, I recommended we expand the nature of our correspondence and asked them to send me portraits of writers and illustrated magazines. And so, I received a splendid portrait of Byron from a young English doctor in Manchester and one of Hugo from a young Frenchwoman in Orléans. She was very curious and asked me all sorts of questions – was it true that Russian priests wore vestments made of gold thread and that Russian military officers all spoke French?

We gathered for a little party at Fitsovsky's every week. We didn't drink much (we only had enough money for a single bottle of brandy), but still we put on airs of being Lermontov's hussars – we read poetry, we argued, we gave speeches, we sang. We stayed up until the early hours of the morning, and

when the first rays of dawn began to filter through the smoke-filled room, they struck us as the beginning of a remarkable new life waiting for us just outside the door. The best were in springtime when the clear morning air rang with the songs of the birds and our heads were filled with romantic tales.

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This remarkable life waiting for us just outside the door was inextricably connected to the theatre.

That year we were all taken with Russian drama and the actress Polevitskaya,[7] who played the parts of Liza in *A Nest of Gentlefolk* and Nastasya in *The Idiot*. We could go to the theatre only with Inspector Bodyansky's written permission. He allowed us only one chit per week. So we started making forgeries. I got so good at faking Bodyansky's signature that even he couldn't tell the forgeries from the real ones when they were confiscated and presented to him by the supervisors. He would yell: 'I ought to lock you all up! Theatre, theatre, nothing but the theatre! You should be hunched over your Latin texts, not hanging out in the gallery! A bunch of forgers, all of you! You dishonour your well-respected parents!'

We waited for Polevitskaya after the play outside the stage door. Out she came – tall and bright-eyed. She smiled at us and got into her sleigh. The horses shook, rattling their bells. The sound followed them down Nikolaevskaya Street as they disappeared in the snowy depths of the night.

Each of us, our cheeks ablaze, hurried off our separate ways in the heavily falling snow. We slipped on the pavement as we went, bubbling over with a happiness that kept us from falling asleep once home in our beds. It flickered on the walls of my room from the light of the street lamp. It piled up in mounds of snow on the ground. It sang to me all night through my warm sleep with its eternal song of love and sorrow. Sleighs whistled by beneath my window. I heard the heavy gallop of horses through the snow. Who was in such a hurry so late at night? In Lieutenant Romuald's room a guitar string sounded by itself. Its hum died away slowly, becoming first a silver hair, next a silver cobweb. Then it was silent.

And so I passed that winter, in a state of joyful excitement, the days all a blur. Reality and poetry had become so entwined I could not tell one from the other. I lived then all on my own, surviving on the little I made giving lessons. I had just enough money for food and a few books, but perhaps since I was young, life was never frightening or a burden.

[1] Mikhail Semënovich Sobakevich, an ursine, unsentimental landowner in Gogol's *Dead Souls*; Tartarin de Tarascon, the naïve and slightly ridiculous hero of Alphonse Daudet's eponymous novel (1872).

[2] Valentin Serov (1865–1911) and Isaak Levitan (1860–1900), painters; Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), composer; Vera Komissarzhevskaya (1864–1910), actress.

[3] Georgy Plekhanov (1856–1918) and Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89), radical Russian thinkers and writers.

[4] Alexander Herzen (1812–70), Pëtr Kropotkin (1842–1921) and Sergei Stepnyak-Kravchinsky (1851–95), also radical Russian thinkers and writers.

[5] Nikolai Ge (1831–94), realist painter known for his works on religious and historical themes.

[6] Abraham Manievich (1881–1942), Jewish artist born in Ukraine, later emigrated to the United States.

[7] Yelena Polevitskaya (1881–1973), actress of stage and screen in Russia and Europe, spent time in the Gulag in the early 1940s.

28

The Hook-Nosed King

Whenever any important person visited Kiev, they were always brought to see our school. It was one of the oldest in Russia. The authorities were proud not only of the gymnasium's history but its magnificent (and uncomfortable) building as well. The most remarkable feature of the building was its white marble Assembly Hall with windows at both ends. The hall was always cold, even in summer. We liked having important visitors because they always asked the director to give us a day or two off from classes to mark the occasion. The director thanked them for the honour shown the school and always agreed to the request. We hurriedly bound up our books with our belts and headed for the front door in wild packs.

But not every visit by some high dignitary went smoothly. Sometimes there was trouble. Once it involved King Peter I of Serbia. We knew he had ascended the throne following a bloody palace coup.

A week before his visit Platon Fëdorovich began teaching us the Serbian national anthem – 'God of Justice, Thou who saved us when in deepest bondage cast' – and instructed us to greet the king with the Serbian '*Zhivio*' and not the Russian 'Hurrah'. Director Tereshchenko ('Butterhead') was to say a few words of welcome in French to the king. Monsieur Gobas wrote the text. He was extremely proud of this. It was the first time in his life he had been asked to write a welcoming speech to a crowned head.

The director memorised the speech, just as we schoolboys would have done. But Butterhead had a bad memory. He was afraid he would forget the words when the time came to welcome King Peter. The worried director ordered the school's new inspector, Varsonofy Nikolaevich (Bodyansky had by then been appointed to the Third Gymnasium), to provide him with the best prompter from among the boys. We didn't like Butterhead and refused to say who was the best. Let Butterhead manage on his own. The school's best prompter, Régamé, was in our form. We all had listened quietly to the inspector's request, polite smiles on our faces. Eventually, we gave in. We agreed to provide the best prompter, but only if Borimovich, a quiet, harmless boy, who had been given an unjustly low mark in mathematics, received a better one. Our instructor Ivanov promised to make the change.

With an agreement reached, Régamé was given the text and then prepared a crib. It began with the usual '*Sire, permettez-nous . . .*' Translated into Russian it sounded rather strange: 'Sir, permit us to welcome you within the grey-haired walls of our illustrious school.' We learned these words by heart, and whenever the director passed by our classroom, we repeated them in his squeaky voice. We especially loved those 'grey-haired walls'. Butterhead pretended that he hadn't heard us.

The school had been scrubbed and polished to a festive sheen in preparation for the king's visit. A red runner was laid upon the main staircase. Even though it was a sunny day, the chandeliers were lit in the Assembly Hall. We arrived in our dress uniforms and were lined up in two rows in the vestibule. Suboch stood alongside us. The gold hilt of his small parade sword peeped out of the top of his pocket. He smelled of eau-de-Cologne. He had polished his pince-nez so thoroughly they glinted like diamonds. Butterhead stood by one of the marble columns. In the jargon of us schoolboys, he had 'blown a gasket'. He was as white as a sheet and the medals on his tight coat shook from nerves.

We heard the honour guard stationed on the street shout hurrah. The cries of the soldiers kept getting louder as the king approached. A band struck up. The doors flew open. A despondent Butterhead looked over at Régamé and hurried to welcome the king.

The king, a small, hook-nosed man with a grey moustache wearing a blue uniform with silver braiding, strutted into the vestibule. Behind him was a large wave of blue uniforms and the shimmer of black top hats. The porter Vasily, a former circus wrestler, was supposed to help the king off with his coat. But he became all confused, and instead of relieving the king of his coat, tried to force him back into it, at which point the king, his face flushed, resisted and then managed to break free of Vasily's enormous paws. An adjutant sprang forward, brushed Vasily aside with a white-gloved hand, and obligingly removed the royal coat. Vasily stood panting at attention, unable to understand what had just happened. His eyes glazed as though he were drunk.

'*Sire!*' said Butterhead, bowing before the king and waving his left hand in a frantic motion behind his back. This was the signal that he had forgotten his speech.

Régamé began to 'serve up' the prepared text. He did it masterfully.

The king looked with displeasure at the director's bald red head. He was still panting after the struggle with Vasily. Then he overheard Régamé's prompting and grinned. The director somehow managed to get through his welcoming remarks and, pointing to the narrow path between the long rows of us schoolboys in our blue uniforms, invited the king into the Assembly Hall. The king began to move, followed by the crush of his suite, the officers' swords clattering wildly over the vestibule's metal floor as they went. The flash of their epaulettes blinded our eyes. Walking a step behind the king was General Ivanov, the bellicose commander of the Kiev district. Next came the Serbian ministers holding their top hats and dispensing sugary smiles.

We had put our little plot together well in advance. As soon as the king began to make his way between us boys, we shouted in one friendly voice, '*Zhulë!*' It sounded almost the same as the Serbian '*Zhivio*', but, in Russian, meant 'bunch of scoundrels'. We repeated our salute a few times and it reverberated down the 'grey-haired walls' of our school.

Not suspecting a thing, the king walked slowly on, clanking his spurs, nodding and smiling at us as he went. Suboch blanched. General Ivanov made a fist at us behind his back. The white kid glove in his hand shook with fury. A horrified Butterhead stumbled, caught himself and then minced along after the king.

After the king had passed, we heard the school choir up in the balcony greet him with the Serbian national anthem, their voices solemn and pious. Suboch stared us up and down. We stood quietly to attention, however, and our faces showed nothing but the tender emotions befitting such a solemn occasion. Suboch shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

But we were not quite done with the king. As he passed us on the way out, we shouted just as welcomingly and deafeningly as before: '*Derzhi yevo!*' – 'Grab him!' Again, it sounded almost like '*Zhivio!*' and again the king didn't notice a thing. He just smiled graciously, and his ministers, cradling their top hats lined with white silk, filed elegantly past us towards the door. It was only when the grey- bearded and supposedly liberal Serbian prime minister, Nikola Pašić, approached that we correctly and clearly shouted: '*Zhivio Pašić!*'

We had, of course, overdone it. We had charged Matusevich, a boy with powerful bass voice (he went on to sing for the Kiev Opera), to bellow 'Grab him!' directly into the king's ear. And he did. The blast almost knocked the king over, but he quickly recovered and then gave Matusevich a polite nod.

After the incident twelve of us got a dressing down from the director and were rusticated for three days. The authorities wanted to cover up the scandal in the hope it would just go away, and so our punishment was extremely light. To this day I still don't understand why they even bothered. For me, those three days were filled with nothing but relaxation, reading, walks along the Dnieper and outings to the theatre. Not surprisingly, word of the scandal with the Serbian king leaked out. We became the envy not only of the rest of our school, but of every school in the city, none of which was ever honoured by a royal visit.

29

Wasting Time

To this day I am suspicious of people with round, black eyes. My pupil Marusya Kazanskaya had eyes like that. They looked like little olives.

Her eyes stared blankly upon the world and only came alive with curiosity when some dashing cadet or student from the lycée in his coat with a beaver collar passed by her window. The mere sight of such a fine young man was enough for the knowledge Marusya had worked so hard to learn – dates, geography, the rules of syntax – to immediately fly out of her head. I had been hired to tutor Marusya, a twittering girl with a pointy nose and beady eyes. Suboch found me the job. 'They're a very respectable family,' he had told me, 'but I'll warn you the girl is no genius.'

The very respectable family consisted of Marusya, her father – a retired general – and her skinny French mother. The general was no bigger than a dwarf. He was so short in fact he couldn't reach the hook to hang up his own coat. He did, however, boast a luxuriant beard. The general was an extremely clean and tidy man with puffy hands and watery eyes that flashed with anger when he recalled his enemies – all those generals who had been promoted ahead of him, men such as Sukhomlinov, Dragomirov, Kuropatkin and Rennenkampf.[1] Kazansky had retired with the rank of adjutant general after commanding a number of military districts and giving lessons in strategy to the heir to the throne. 'As for military strategy,' Kazansky would say of his pupil, the future Nicholas II, 'that young man was a complete dunderhead.' He considered Alexander III to have been the last true tsar.

Kazansky had a large library of books on warfare, but I never once saw him remove a single one of them from behind the locked shelves. Rather, he spent his days reading the *New Times* or playing patience. Curled up on his lap lay a small Pomeranian with little black eyes just like Marusya's. The dog was mean and stupid.

After every lesson Kazansky would accompany me as far as the Galitsky Market. He loved these daily walks and came alive as soon as we left the house. He would laugh and joke and tell me stories of army life. He liked to poke his walking stick into the stomachs of the soldiers and cadets who stopped to salute him, saying: 'I'm tired of this sort of thing, soldier! You've all got fat. Suck in that belly of yours!'

Madame Kazanskaya and her husband had ridiculous pet names for each other. I have met many boring people, but no one as boring as her. Blinking away tears from her wet, lap-dog eyes, she spent her days sewing pinafores for Marusya or painting purple irises on pink satin ribbons. She gave the ribbons as birthday presents to her acquaintances. No one knew what they were for. They had no discernible use. Some people hung them on the wall or laid them out on drawing room tables. Others tried to use them as bookmarks, but they were too big and wide and didn't fit somehow. The more discriminating of her acquaintances stuffed them somewhere out of sight. But Madame Kazanskaya just kept on painting these ribbons with idiotic persistence and giving them to the same people, over and over. Ribbons filled their flat. They were everywhere and you couldn't avoid them no matter what. It was enough to drive one mad.

The Kazanskys' flat had high ceilings and tall windows, but the light inside seemed cold and grey. The sun's rays somehow lost their warmth and sparkle as they passed through the glass and just lay on the floors like faded sheets of paper.

At first I could not make sense of the Kazanskys' view of life. They believed in God, and they believed that this God had constructed the world in such a way that it would benefit the Kazanskys. God, in their understanding, was some sort of tsarist governor general, albeit on a much larger scale, of course. He kept order in the universe and looked after respectable families. Along with God, the Kazanskys had another divinity, Marusya, and they showered her with the morbid love of parents who have children late in life. Her whims were not just charming; they were sacred. At the mere sight of her pouting lower lip, the general immediately removed his spurs and tiptoed about the flat, sighing, and her mama quaked and rushed off to the kitchen to prepare Marusya's favourite meringue treats.

The old couple's main topic of conversation was arranging Marusya's marriage. The search for a husband was done carefully, step by step, and with time grew into an obsession. Madame Kazanskaya's memory became a thick, heavy ledger in which the name, and worth, of every eligible bachelor in Kiev

and the entire south-western territory of the Russian Empire was recorded.

Marusya attended Madame Duchinskaya's private gymnasium. The school was not attended by the daughters of noblemen, but social hierarchy was still paramount, and marks were given according to the wealth and social standing of each girl's parents. Marusya, however, was so stupid that even Papa Kazansky's high rank could not save her from receiving the lowest marks. Every time she was called to the blackboard, she just stood there sullenly, pressing her lips together and picking at the trim of her black pinafore.

Each failing mark caused a commotion in the general's household. Marusya locked herself in her room and declared a hunger strike. Madame Kazanskaya was convulsed with sobs. The general ran from one end of the flat to the other, screaming that he was going to go and see the governor the very next day and insist that this 'Jewish nest' of a school be shut down.

The following morning the general donned his parade uniform and all his medals and left to have it out with the school's headmistress, Madame Duchinskaya, a majestic lady who understood well the position and power of her pupils' parents. In the end, Marusya was given the lowest passing mark. Duchinskaya did not want to lose the daughter of a such an exalted family, for this might cast a shadow on her irreproachable institution. With this, the Kazansky family calmed down, until the next failed examination.

After my first session with Marusya I became convinced that trying to explain things to her was utterly pointless. She couldn't understand a thing. And so, I opted for a risky approach. I made her memorise her textbooks. This she somehow managed. She learned page after page by heart just as children memorise counting rhymes like 'Ten fat sausages, sizzling in a pan, one went pop and the other went bang! Eight fat sausages . . .' I could have used the same method to teach history, geography and Russian to a parrot. It was hellish work. I found it exhausting. But soon I was rewarded for my efforts: Marusya brought home a passing mark in one of her examinations.

That evening when I rang the bell to the Kazanskys' flat, the general himself opened the door. He had a spring in his step and was rubbing his hands. Around his neck hung the Order of St Vladimir. He helped me off with my old school coat. Marusya, in a new dress, her hair done up with enormous bows, was waltzing with a chair for a partner in the drawing room. She was accompanied by Mademoiselle Martin, her French instructor, on the piano. The Pomeranian ran from room to room, barking incessantly. The door to the dining room flew open and out walked Madame Kazanskaya wearing a dress with a long train. I could see behind her back that the table had been laid for an elaborate celebration. An exquisite dinner had been planned to acknowledge the occasion of Marusya's first decent mark.

At the end of the meal, the general nonchalantly popped the cork on a bottle of champagne. Madame Kazanskaya kept a close watch to make certain he didn't spill any on the tablecloth. The general began gulping the champagne as if it were water. In an instant, his face turned red. He started flapping his arms wildly. His shiny round cufflinks came loose and went flying across the room.

'Yes, sir!' the general said, shaking his head despondently. 'Every man has his cross to bear in this hell of life. And carry it we do! Life's no bed of roses for us. Women, my dear fellow, simply don't understand us. They've got the brains of a chicken.'

'My little dove,' said a frightened Madame Kazanskaya, 'I don't understand a word you're saying.'

'To hell with it!' the general said with conviction. 'Let me say it again: To hell with it! Let's drink, my friend. As our great poet said: "Oh, what a lot, Creator, to be the father of a grown-up daughter!"'[2]

'My little dove, how can you!' cried Madame Kazanskaya, causing the little bluish bags under her eyes to tremble.

'Oh, my sweet muffin,' said the general in a sugary yet threatening voice. 'You would be wise to remember that I am an Adjutant General in the Imperial Russian Army.' He slammed a fist on the table and bellowed, his voice cracking: 'Listen when I'm talking to you! I have had the honour of giving instruction to His Imperial Majesty the Tsar and I don't care to hear any comments from mindless fools like you! Attention!'

After this outburst, he calmed down a bit, and then leapt from his chair, grabbed a napkin, tapped with his heels, and started dancing about the room. This didn't last long before he collapsed into an armchair and had to be revived with spirits of valerian. He sat there moaning, his little legs twitching.

Mademoiselle Martin and I left the party together. The street lamps were barely visible. It was a foggy March evening.

'Oh, I'm exhausted!' said Mademoiselle Martin. 'I can't teach that stupid girl any longer or even go back to that house of fools. I refuse.'

I was envious of her. She could choose not to give lessons to Marusya while I couldn't: the Kazanskys were paying me thirty roubles a month. This was an unheard-of sum for a tutor. It was at this time that

Father unexpectedly quit his job at the Bryansk factory and left Bezhitsa for my grandfather's home at Gorodishche. He could help me no more. I lied to Mama. I wrote to her that I was earning fifty roubles a month and didn't need any help. Not that she had anything to give me.

Mademoiselle Martin and I parted at the corner of Bezakovskaya Street. It was snowing heavily. An incandescent light buzzed over the entrance of a chemist's shop. She walked off in the direction of Bibikovsky Boulevard, making swift, gliding steps over the slippery pavement as if she were on roller skates. Her head was lowered, and she was shielding her face from the snow with her muff.

I stood and watched her go. I felt strange after the champagne. I had moments when my head felt foggy and it seemed to me as if I were on the verge of some miraculous new beginning, but just as quickly the fog would clear and I understood with complete clarity that nothing had changed. Tomorrow, just like today, I would walk these same streets so well known to me now and would pass by the same old front gardens, droshky drivers, advertisements and policemen, and would make my way to the home of the Kazanskys. I would climb the yellow-tiled stairs, would ring at the doors painted to look like oak, would hear the Pomeranian begin to bark, and would then be allowed back into the now-familiar entryway with its mirror and coat stand, upon which I would see hanging on its usual hook the general's greatcoat with its red lapels and all its buttons done up from top to bottom.

Then that same fog came back, and I thought of the kinship among lonely people like Mademoiselle Martin, Fitsovsky and myself. It seemed to me that we ought to be friends and help each other get through life. But what made me think Mademoiselle Martin was lonely? I didn't even know her. I had heard she was from Grenoble and could see that she had dark and slightly sullen eyes, but that was all.

I stood there on the corner for a while and then went to see Fitsovsky. He wasn't at home. I found the key in its usual hiding place and opened the door.

The room was cold. I lit the lamp, kindled the fire in the iron stove, picked up a book of poetry from the table, lay down on the oilskin sofa and covered myself with my coat. I opened the book, and once again that same fog rolled over me. 'The autumn days descend in slow succession,'[3] I read. A warm light appeared between the lines on the page. It began to grow and spread, and I could feel its heat on my face.

> A yellow leaf twists slowly to the ground,
> The air is marvellously pure, and transparent the freshness of the day,
> Yet my soul cannot escape its invisible decay.

I put the book aside. I lay there thinking about the future before me that would be filled with many remarkable moments, some happy, some sad. The future was like this night, with the soft gleam of the snowdrifts, the silence of the gardens, the glow of the street lamps. The night hid in its darkness those good people who would one day become dear to me and that gentle dawn that was destined to break over the earth. The night hid all the mysteries, all the encounters, all the joys of the life to come, and I found it wonderful.

No, we young people were not unhappy. We believed and we loved. We did not bury our talent in the ground. Our souls were not in danger of 'invisible decay'. No. We were ready to struggle to the death for our wonderful future. That is what I thought as I lay on that oilskin sofa. To hell with all those loathsome Kazanskys and their kind, to hell with that whole anthill of cruel respectability.

When I returned home to Diky Lane from Fitsovsky's, Pani Kozlovskaya handed me a telegram. It said that my father was dying on the farm at Gorodishche. The next morning, I left Kiev for Belaya Tserkov. My father's death broke a thread binding me to my family. It was the first one. Soon the remaining threads began to break as well.

[1] Generals Vladimir Sukhomlinov (1848–1926), Vladimir Dragomirov (1862–1928), Alexei Kuropatkin (*q.v.*) and Paul von Rennenkampf (1854– 1918).

[2] Famous line spoken by Pavel Famusov in Alexander Griboedov's *Woe from Wit* (1823).

[3] Opening lines of 'Autumn Elegy' (1900) by Alexander Blok (1880–1921).

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The Inn on the Braginka

The old steamer was slowly paddling its way up the Dnieper. It was late at night. I couldn't get to sleep in the stuffy cabin and went out on deck. Out of the invisible darkness the wind was blowing, carrying raindrops with it. An old man in a patched coat was standing by the captain's bridge. The dim light of a lantern illuminated his bristly face.

'Captain,' the old man said, 'couldn't you do an aged man a favour and let me off on the shore here? It's less than a verst from here to my village.'

'What, are you joking?' the captain asked. 'I can't see my hand in front of my face, but you want me to head into shore and smash up my boat for you?'

'But I'm not joking,' he replied. 'My village is just there over the hill.' He pointed into the darkness. 'Let me off ! Be so kind!'

Pretending not to have heard the old man, the captain asked the helmsman: 'Terenty, can you see anything?'

'I can't even see my own arm,' the helmsman growled sullenly. 'This damned darkness! I'm steering by sound.'

'We'll damage the boat,' the captain said.

'Nothing'll happen to your old tub!' the man muttered angrily. 'Call yourself a captain? You ought to be selling pears in Loevo and not taking boats up the Dnieper! Well, are you gonna drop me off or not?'

'I've already told you!'

'And *I'm* telling *you*!' the old man answered, peevishly. 'Who's ever heard of passengers being ferried all the way to Teremtsy without stopping?'

'Now listen,' the captain shouted, 'I can't see a thing! Where am I going to land? Where?'

'Right here, across from the steep bank!' Once more he pointed out into the pitch-black darkness. 'Right here! Let me stand next to the helmsman and I'll show him.'

'Know what?' the captain said. 'Why don't you just go to hell?'

'Aha!' the old man cried with a note of victory. 'So you refuse? Is that so? You refuse?'

'Yes! I refuse!'

'So, in other words, it means nothing to you that I'm hurrying to my daughter's wedding? You couldn't care less. You're tormenting an old man!'

'What's your daughter to me?'

Suddenly, the old man lowered his voice. 'But what about Andrei Gon?' he asked menacingly. 'You've not yet had the opportunity to meet Andrei Gon? Well, you ought to know that Andrei Gon himself will be at the wedding.'

The captain was silent.

'Lost your tongue, have you?' the old man asked in a nasty tone. 'Your old tub is called *Hope*. Well, you'll have no hope of getting home safely if you don't let me ashore. Gon does good turns for me. He's my brother-in-law. Gon won't forget this.'

'Stop threatening me!' muttered the captain.

'Sidor Petrovich,' said the helmsman in a hoarse voice, 'you can see what a stubborn old man he is. Let's let him ashore. It's not worth getting mixed up with Gon.'

'Oh, fine, whatever!' said the captain to the old man. 'Go and stand by the helmsman and show him the way. But make sure you don't wreck the boat.'

'Good heavens! I know the Dnieper like the back of my hand! And I'm fully aware that the boat is government property!'

The old man went over to the wheel and began to give commands. 'Down hard with your right hand! Harder or you'll miss it! That's it. Now again, harder!'

Willow branches began to lash the sides of the boat. The boat scraped against the bottom and then came to a stop. On the covered deck below, the passengers, jolted awake by the thud, began to make a noise. A sailor shone a lantern from the bow. The steamer sat in the flooded underbrush. It was about thirty paces to shore. Black water rushed among the bushes.

‘Well,’ the captain said to the old man, ‘out you climb. We’ve arrived.’

‘How can I get out here?’ the old man said, full of surprise. ‘It’s over my head. I could drown!’

‘What’s that to me? You asked for it yourself. Well?!’ shouted the captain. ‘Hurry up and jump or I’ll order the crew to toss you into the water!’

‘An interesting business this!’ muttered the old man before making his way to the bow.

He crossed himself, climbed over the railing, and jumped into the water. The water came up to his neck. Unleashing a torrent of curses, he floundered noisily towards the shore. The steamer slowly backed out of the thickets.

‘Well, still alive?’ shouted the captain.

‘Stop your barking! What do you think?’ the old man answered from the shore. ‘Just the same, you can count on a meeting with Andrei Gon.’

The steamer moved on up the river.

Elusive gangs of bandits had been roaming about Chernigov province and all of Polesia that summer. They raided isolated manors and farmsteads, robbed the mail and attacked the trains. The fastest and most daring of the *atamans* was Andrei Gon. Time and again units of dragoons and frontier guards surrounded him in the woods, drove him into the impassable marshes of Polesia, but every time Andrei Gon escaped to freedom, the flames of the fires he set behind him lighting his way through the dark night. Legends had already grown up around him. People said that Andrei Gon was a defender of the poor, the wretched and the orphaned, that he only attacked the manors of the nobles, that he himself was either a Chernigov student or a village blacksmith. His name became a symbol of popular vengeance. I was travelling that summer to those very places lorded over by Andrei Gon, to my distant relations by the name of Sevryuk. They had a small, modest estate called Iolcha in Polesia. Borya had arranged the trip. I didn’t know the Sevryuk family at all.

‘You’ll enjoy a nice rest at Iolcha,’ he had said. ‘The Sevryuks are a bit odd, but very simple. They’ll be happy to see you.’

I agreed to go to Iolcha because I had no other choice. I had moved on into the eighth form at the gymnasium. Having just passed my examinations, I was facing a long boring summer in Kiev. Uncle Kolya had left for Kislovodsk with Aunt Marusya. Mama had stayed in Moscow. And I didn’t want to go to Gorodishche because I could tell from Uncle Ilko’s letters that things were not going well between him and Aunt Dozia. Family quarrels frightened me. I didn’t want to see any more or be forced to play a part in them.

It was the evening of the second day of my journey when the steamer pulled alongside the low banks of the Dnieper. Clouds of mosquitoes whined overhead. The purple sun was sinking into the pale steam over the river. Cold came out of the underbrush. A fire was burning. Around it stood a few sinewy saddle horses.

The Sevryuks were waiting for me on the shore: a thin man in boots and a silk jacket, the owner of the manor; a short, young woman, his wife; and a student, her brother. They settled me into a cart, and then the Sevryuks jumped onto their horses and, with a yell, set off at a swinging trot. They quickly vanished from sight, and I was left alone with the taciturn driver. I hopped down from the cart and walked along the sandy road. Tall grass protruded out of the dark swamp water along the roadside. The faint reflection of the setting sun in the water refused to die. Ducks flew overhead, beating their heavy wings in steady rhythm. Fog crawled out of the undergrowth before settling like soft grey rags over the ground. Suddenly, a hundred frogs began to croak, and the cart clattered over a span of wooden planks. The manor, enclosed by a palisade, came into view. It was a strange, octagonal house with many verandahs and extensions, standing in a clearing in the forest.

That evening, as we sat eating a simple supper, a stooped old man in flimsy leather shoes and a cap with its peak torn off walked into the dining room. He took a long hunting rifle from his shoulder and leaned it against the wall. A black-and-white pointer followed him in, its nails clacking against the floorboards, sat and began to bang the floor with its tail. The banging was so loud, the old man said: ‘Quiet, Halas! Behave yourself !’

Halas stopped banging his tail, yawned and lay down.

‘Well, Trofim, what news?’ asked Sevryuk, and, turning to me, said: ‘This is our forester, our inspector.’

‘What news?’ Trofim sighed, taking a seat at the table. ‘All of the same sort. They’ve burned down the manor at Lyady, and at Staraya Guta they beat Pan Kaputsinsky to death, God rest his soul. He was a wicked old scoundrel, truth be told, but still . . . Nothing but murder and plunder all around, but you alone they seem to spare. It’s most peculiar! Why does he leave you in peace, that Andrei Gon? Nobody knows. Perhaps he’s heard you get on well with the peasants. Or maybe he just hasn’t got around to you yet.’

Marina Pavlovna, Sevryuk's wife, laughed. 'He's always going on like that, Trofim is,' she said. 'Always amazed that we're still alive.'

'And may you live a long and healthy life,' said Trofim. 'I've nothing against it. Have you heard about the blind man's guide?'

'No, what about him?' asked Marina Pavlovna excitedly.

'What indeed! They're burying him tomorrow at Pagonnoe. You ought to go.'

'We certainly will,' said Marina Pavlovna.

'For that God will forgive you many a sin,' Trofim sighed. 'You might take me with you. I don't have the strength to walk there on my own.'

Trofim looked out of the window and asked in a low voice: 'Are we all alone?'

'Just our own people,' replied Sevryuk. 'Speak.'

'Well, all right,' Trofim began mysteriously. 'The Masters are holding a meeting at Leizer's inn on the Braginka.'

'Who?' the student asked.

'The Masters, you know, the Old Men of Mogilëv.'

'Hold on a minute, Trofim,' said Sevryuk. 'Let me explain it to them. They don't know anything about the Old Men of Mogilëv.'

It was then I heard for the first time the strange tale of the Old Men of Mogilëv. The story carried me back in time, a century or more, perhaps as far as the Middle Ages. For a long time, ever since the days of the Polish empire, a commune of beggars and blind men has existed in Mogilëv on the Dnieper. These beggars – known to the people as the 'Old Men of Mogilëv' – have their own elders and teachers, the Masters.

The Masters train the new members of the commune in the complicated ways of their craft – how to chant the religious verses and beg for alms – and teach them the demanding laws of the beggars' world. The beggars are scattered all across Polesia, Belorussia and Ukraine, but every year the Masters gather in some secret place – an isolated inn on the marshes or some abandoned forester's hut – for trials or the admission of new beggars into the commune. The Old Men of Mogilëv have their own language that outsiders can't understand. In times of trouble, in the years of popular unrest, these beggars became a terrible force. They kept the peasants' anger alive with their ballads about the wicked rule of the Polish landowners and the heavy burdens of the exploited village folk.

After this tale, the region of Polesia, where I now found myself, acquired a completely new image in my mind. It seemed that in this land of swamps and stunted forests, of mists and wilderness, the fires of resentment and vengeance, like the sunsets, smouldered but never died out. From then on, the rags of the beggars smelled to me not of bread and the dust of the road, but of gunpowder and arson. I now looked more closely at the blind men and paupers, and I realised that the special tribe to which they belonged was not merely that of the unfortunates but of gifted men of ruthless will.

'Why have they gathered at the inn on the Braginka?' asked Sevryuk.

'Who knows? They gather every year,' Trofim answered, unwillingly. 'Have the guards been sniffing around here?'

'No, but we've heard they were at Komarin yesterday,' Sevryuk replied.

'Oh well.' Trofim got up. 'Thank you. I'm going up to the hayloft for some rest.'

Trofim left, though he didn't go to the hayloft, but out into the forest, and he only returned the following morning. Marina Pavlovna told me the story of the young boy who had been the blind man's guide. Two days earlier, the two had walked onto the estate of a wealthy landowner named Lyubomirsky. They were driven out of the courtyard, and as they went the Ingush watchman (many wealthy landowners in those days hired Ingush men as their guards) let the wolfhound off its chain, and it ran after them. The blind man stopped, but the boy panicked and ran. The wolfhound caught the boy and killed him. The blind man had saved himself by standing absolutely still. The wolfhound just sniffed him, growled and then walked off. The peasants found the boy's body and brought it to Pogonnoe. The boy was to be buried tomorrow.

I liked the Sevryuks. Marina Pavlovna was a magnificent rider and a crack shot. She was small, but very strong, and walked with a swift, light step. She held harsh opinions, which she expressed in a characteristic drawl, and loved to read historical novels such as Danilevsky's *Fugitives of Novorossiya*.[1] Sevryuk had the look of a sick man. He was very thin and had a mocking air about him. He ignored his neighbours, preferring the company of peasants, and kept himself busy tending to his small estate. As for the student, Marina's brother, he spent his days hunting. In his spare time, he filled cartridges, cast shot and cleaned his double-barrelled Belgian gun.

The next day we went to the village of Pogonnoe. We took a ferry across the deep and cold Braginka.

The wind rustled in the willows along the banks. On this side of the river, a sandy road ran between the edge of the forest and a swamp. The swamp stretched to the horizon, losing itself in the hazy light. Its pools of water reflected the sun like so many windows, swathes of flowers formed yellow islands, and the grey sedge could be heard bending in the wind. I had never in my life seen such enormous marshlands. Far from the road amid the luxuriant green quagmire stood a blackened, slanting cross marking the spot where a hunter had drowned many years ago.

We could hear the funeral bells coming from Pogonnoe. Our carriage drove into the empty village with its small huts, their roofs covered with rotting straw. Squawking chickens fluttered about trying to avoid the horses' hooves. A crowd had formed in front of the wooden church. Through the open doors we could see burning candles, whose light fell on garlands of paper roses decorating the icons. As we entered the church, the crowd fell silent and parted to let us pass. The boy was lying in a narrow pine coffin, his flaxen hair carefully combed; a tall, thin candle had been placed in his bloodless hands across his chest. As it burned, the candle bent, dripping wax on the boy's yellow fingers. A scruffy priest in a black vestment hurriedly prayed and swung the censer. I looked at the boy. He seemed to be trying to remember something but couldn't think of it.

Sevryuk touched my arm. I turned around. He motioned with his eyes off to one side of the coffin. I looked. There the old beggars stood in a row. They were all dressed in identical brown robes, in their hands were old wooden staffs, rubbed shiny with age. Their grey heads were raised to gaze at a painting of a silver-bearded Lord of Hosts hanging over the altar. The image looked strangely like them – the same sunken, threatening eyes, the same lean, dark face.

'The Masters!' Sevryuk whispered to me.

The beggars stood motionless, neither crossing themselves nor bowing. The space around them was empty. Behind the beggars I could see two boys, blind men's guides, with canvas bags on their backs. One of them was quietly crying and wiping his nose with his sleeve. The other stood there, his eyes lowered, laughing. Women sighed. Sometimes the dull rumble of men's voices carried in from the church porch. The priest would look up and begin to pray in a louder voice. The rumble then died down. All of a sudden, the beggars moved towards the coffin, silently lifted it up and carried it out of the church. Behind them the two boys led the blind men.

The coffin was lowered into the ground at the cemetery, which was crowded with old, crooked crosses. Water had already begun to seep into the grave. The priest said a last prayer, took off his vestment, rolled it up and walked, limping, out of the cemetery. Two aged peasants spat on their hands and picked up their shovels. Just then a blind man with the face of a hawk came forward and said: 'People, wait!' The crowd fell silent. Feeling for the edge of the grave with his stick, he bowed over the coffin and, staring straight ahead with his white eyes, began to chant:

> Under a dry willow, beside a shallow brook,
> Wearied from the road, the Lord took His rest,
> The people came to Him from all around,
> And laid their offerings before Him on the ground.

The crowd moved closer to the blind man.

> Women gave him Him honey and homespun, and girls their necklaces,
> Old men gave Him black bread, old women gave Him icons,
> A little girl offered Him periwinkles,
> Laying them at His feet before running off
> To hide behind the barn. The Lord smiled,
> And then asked: 'But who will give me his heart?
> Who would not begrudge me his heart?'

A young woman in a white shawl cried softly. The blind man fell silent, turned towards her and went on:

> Then a young lad brought Him his heart,
> It fluttered like a dove, and he laid it in His hands.
> The Lord looked and saw it was pierced and covered with blood.
> It was tarnished and as black as the earth,
> Blackened from tears and perpetual suffering,
> From the boy's wanderings across this earth,

Leading the blind and having never known happiness.

The beggar held his hands out in front of him.

The Lord stood and lifted this weak heart,
All-powerful He arose and cursed the unrighteousness of men.
Black clouds settled over the earth,
Thunder crashed over the forests,
And the mighty voice of the Lord rang out.

Here the blind man suddenly smiled with joy.

'I shall bring this heart to My heavenly throne,
And keep it as a rare gift from the human race,
Before which all good souls may bow down.'

The blind man fell silent, paused for a moment, and then sang in a powerful yet muffled voice:

This orphan's heart is richer than diamonds,
More splendid than flowers, brighter than the stars,
Because it was given by a beautiful young boy
As a humble gift to Almighty God.

The women in the crowd wiped their eyes with the ends of their dark kerchiefs. 'Give alms, good people,' the blind man said, 'for the soul of Vasily, the innocent murdered boy.' He held out his battered old cap. Copper coins were tossed in. The two men began to shovel dirt into the grave. We slowly made our way back to the church, where our horses were waiting. Marina Pavlovna walked in front. No one said a word the entire way. Only Trofim spoke. 'People have been living on earth for thousands of years, and yet they've still not learned to be good. How strange.'

After the boy's funeral, fear descended on the Sevryuks' estate. The doors were now secured with heavy locks in the evening, and Sevryuk and the student got out of bed every night to patrol the estate with loaded guns. One night someone lit a campfire in the woods. It burned until dawn. In the morning, Trofim reported that a stranger had spent the night there. 'Must have been one of Gon's men,' he added. 'Been circling around here like wolves.' Later that day a barefoot fellow in black army trousers with faded red piping walked onto the estate. He had his boots slung over his shoulder. His face was peeling from sunburn. His eyes were sullen and watchful. He asked for a drink. Marina Pavlovna brought him a jug of milk and a loaf of bread. The fellow gulped down the milk and then said: 'You're a brave lot. You're not afraid to live in such a place.'

'No one is going to harm us,' said Marina Pavlovna.

'Why's that?' the fellow laughed.

'Because we don't do any harm to anyone.'

'Others might see it differently,' he said, cryptically, and then left.

This encounter is why Marina Pavlovna was not pleased about Sevryuk leaving the next day for a neighbouring village to buy provisions and gunpowder. Sevryuk took me with him. We had planned to be back that evening.

I enjoyed our ride through the deserted countryside. The road ran through the marshlands and over sandy hills overgrown with small, stunted pines. The turning wheels produced a steady trickle of sand. Grass snakes slithered across the road in front of us. It was a sultry day, and we could see the hot air hanging over the swamps. In the little Jewish village, goats wandered about on the roofs of the houses and nibbled on the moss. A wooden star of David had been nailed above the entrance to the synagogue. In the square, hay littered the ground and the drowsy horses belonging to a unit of dragoons stood about. The soldiers, red-faced from the hot sun, lay on the ground near their horses. They had unbuttoned their uniforms and were lazily singing:

Soldiers, O you brave fellows, where are your women?
See here our loaded cannons? These are our women!

Their officer sat on the inn's front porch drinking a glass of cloudy kvass. We visited the shops, called 'vaults'. It was cool and dark inside them. Pigeons pecked at the grain in the scales. The Jewish

shopkeepers in their shiny black caps complained that there was no point in trading because all their profits went in bribes to the head of the district police. They told us that the day before yesterday Andrei Gon had raided a nearby estate and made off with four excellent horses. In one of the 'vaults' they served us pink-coloured sweets and tea that smelled faintly of paraffin.

We were late leaving the village. Sevryuk whipped the horses, but they quickly tired in the heavy sand and could only manage a slow walk. Clouds of flies swarmed over their rumps; the horses swished feverishly with their stringy tails trying to keep them off. A thunderstorm was brewing to the south. The swamps darkened. The wind picked up, shaking the trees and carrying the smell of water. Lightning flashed, and far off in the distance the earth rumbled.

'We'll have to turn off and stop at the inn on the Braginka,' said Sevryuk. 'We'll spend the night there. We wasted too much time back in the village.'

We turned onto an almost invisible forest road. The wheels of the carriage kept banging on the tree roots. It began to grow dark. The woods thinned out. A damp breeze met our faces, and we drove up to an inn, black against the sky's fading light. It stood on the very banks of the Braginka under some willows. Behind it, the ground was overgrown with nettles and hemlock in the shape of tall umbrellas. From this fragrant undergrowth came the anxious clucking of chickens, frightened and seeking shelter from the approaching storm.

A stout, elderly Jew came out onto the sagging porch – this was Leizer, the innkeeper. He was wearing boots. A red sash held up his trousers, which were as baggy as a Gypsy's. Leizer smiled sweetly and closed his eyes.

'What a guest!' he exclaimed, shaking his head. 'It's easier to find a diamond in the forest than to entice such a pleasant guest to my inn. Please, be so kind as to enter my immaculate establishment.'

Despite the sweet smile, Leizer watched us warily from under his swollen, red eyelids.

'I know, Leizer,' said Sevryuk, 'that the Masters are here at the inn. Don't worry. It's none of our business. All sorts of folk visit the inn!'

'What can I do?' Leizer asked with a heavy sigh. 'All around us nothing but forests and bogs. Can I choose my lodgers? I'm sometimes frightened of them myself, Pan Sevryuk.'

We went in. The scrubbed floorboards creaked under our steps. Over time the room had settled, and everything in it was slightly askew. A bloated, white-haired woman was sitting in a bed, propped up by pink pillows.

'My dear mamma,' explained Leizer. 'She has dropsy. Dvoira!' he shouted. 'Get the samovar ready!'

A little woman with a sad face, Leizer's wife, peeped out from behind a curtain and greeted us. The windows were closed because of the storm. Flies were beating themselves against the glass. A flyblown portrait of General Kuropatkin hung on the wall. Leizer brought hay for our bedding. He laid it on the floor and covered it with heavy sacking. We sat down at the table to drink our tea when all of a sudden there was a clap of thunder so heavy it made the china jump. The rain drummed on the inn's roof with a heavy, steady beat. Grey streams poured down the dark windows illuminated now and then by bleary flashes of lightning. The downpour drowned out the hiss of the samovar. We ate rolls with our tea, which had not tasted so good in a long time. I liked the inn, and this feeling of complete isolation, the sound of the rain, the thunder in the woods. From the far side of the wall, we could just barely make out the voices of the beggars.

I was tired from the jolting of the cart and the long, hot day and fell asleep on the hay as soon as I had finished my tea. I awoke in the middle of the night drenched in sweat. The heavy smell of paraffin filled the room. The night light flickered. The old woman moaned in her sleep. Sevryuk sat up next to me.

'Let's go and lie down in the cart or this fug will give me a heart attack,' he said.

We tiptoed out. The cart was in a shed. We spread out some hay, lay down and covered ourselves with some sacking. The thunderstorm had passed. Stars shone in the moist air over the woods. We could hear the rain dripping off the roof. The smell of wet weeds filtered into the shed. A door creaked. Someone came out of the inn. Sevryuk whispered: 'Keep quiet. That must be the Masters.' Someone sat down on a log by the shed and struck a flint. There was a quick flash, followed by the smell of cheap tobacco.

'As soon as we can see the flames, we'll be on our way,' said a squeaky voice. 'Or else they'll catch us.'

'That's right,' another voice croaked. 'We've stayed here at Leizer's too long already. The Archangels are on the prowl.'

'Nothing's visible yet. Maybe it's too wet from the rain to burn,' came a third voice, younger and full of worry.

'For Gon's men, nothing's too wet, or too much trouble,' replied the squeaky voice.

'They'll do whatever they want,' the croaky voice warned. 'They'll avenge the trouble we've caused. We'll witness God's punishment, assuming we still have eyes to see.'

The beggars fell silent.

'Petro, is everyone ready?' the first man asked.

'Everyone,' answered the young man.

'Then tell them to come out. And don't bother with Leizer. He's already taken his share of the money, and his business doesn't concern us. What about those travellers who just arrived? Are they asleep?'

'Yes, why wouldn't they be?'

Again the men fell silent. I stirred, and Sevryuk put his hand on my arm. A few more men came out of the inn.

'Kuzma and I are heading for Ovruch and then on to Chernobyl,' said a familiar voice. 'Maybe I'll find a new guide near Chernobyl. The people there are starving.' It was the blind man who'd sung over the boy's grave in Pogonnoe.

It grew quiet once more. My heart was pounding. A long time seemed to pass, and then I heard a soft voice. 'There it is.'

The beggars started to move.

'Well, brothers,' said the man with the croaky voice, 'let's say a prayer and then be on our way.'

'Our Father, who art in heaven,' the beggars recited quietly, 'hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done . . .'

The men rose and left.

'What were they talking about?' I asked Sevryuk.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm going out for a smoke.'

He got up and left the shed. Suddenly, I heard his shocked voice out of the darkness.

'What's that? Come here, quick.'

I raced out. Beyond the young willows on the far side of the Braginka the sky was a smoky pink. Tall showers of sparks seemed to be coming from the bushes around us. The light of the fire glowed dimly on the water.

'What's that burning?' asked Sevryuk.

'That's Lyubomirsky's place,' Leizer answered in the darkness next to us. We had not even heard him come up. 'Pan Sevryuk, have pity on yourself and on a poor innkeeper,' he begged. 'I'll harness your horses, and then go, go with God's speed. It'd be best if you weren't here.'

'Why?'

'The dragoons might arrive at any moment from the village, or the border guards. They can't get anything from the innkeeper. The innkeeper didn't say or hear anything.'

'We didn't see anything either,' said Sevryuk.

'Sir!' Leizer pleaded. 'I beg you in the name of your Orthodox God! Go. I don't need your money. I just want to be left alone in peace. Don't you see what's happening here?'

'Well, all right, all right,' Sevryuk agreed. 'You certainly are a man of weak nerves, Leizer. Go and harness the horses.'

Leizer quickly harnessed the horses, and we drove off.

The road followed the banks of the Braginka. Sevryuk dropped the reins and let the horses walk at their own pace. The flames grew higher. Wet branches slapped our faces.

'Now I get it,' said Sevryuk. 'They've set fire to Lyubomirsky's.'

'Who did?'

'I don't know. It must be because of the boy. But you and I didn't stay at the inn, and we didn't see a thing. Understood?'

'Understood,' I said.

We heard a faint but distinct whistle from across the Braginka. Sevryuk reined in the horses. We heard it again. Sevryuk had stopped the cart by some thick undergrowth; no one could see us.

'Hey, innkeeper!' came a soft voice from the far bank, 'ferry me across!'

No one answered. We kept listening. There was a splash. The man had apparently jumped into the water and was trying to swim across. Through the undergrowth we could now see him, illuminated by the faint glow of the fire. He had made it halfway and was struggling mightily against the current. The man scrambled up onto the bank not far from us. We could hear the water pouring off him.

'Just you wait, Leizer, you'll pay for this crossing later,' he said and then walked off into the woods.

After the sound of his footsteps had died away, we slowly drove on.

'Did he seem familiar?' Sevryuk asked in a barely audible voice.

'What?' I asked, confused.

'That man. Did you recognise him?'

'No.'

‘The fellow who showed up at our place. We gave him milk. That sounded to me like his voice. Now it makes sense. The Masters must have complained to Gon, and he sent one of his men to set Lyubomirsky’s house on fire. At least that’s what I think. Leizer ferried him to the other side of the river. But don’t forget, we haven’t seen anything, and we don’t know anything.’

Sevryuk lit a cigarette, carefully shielding the match with a fold of his raincoat. The fire’s glow rose ever higher, twisting in the night sky. The river gurgled in the flooded undergrowth, the axles squeaked. Later, a cold mist rose over the marches. Wet and chilled to the bone, we didn’t arrive back at the estate until dawn.

After this incident, anxious days followed. I actually enjoyed them. I liked the constant expectation of danger, the hushed conversations, the rumours Trofim brought back about how Gon had suddenly been sighted now here, now there. I liked the cold Braginka and its reeds – certainly the hiding place for bandits – and the hoofmarks on the road that appeared mysteriously in the night. I’ll even admit I hoped Andrei Gon would make a raid on the Sevryuks’ estate, so long as he didn’t burn down the house or kill anyone. But instead of Andrei Gon, the dragoons appeared one evening at dusk. They dismounted near the gates, and their officer strode up in his dusty boots to the verandah where we were having tea. He excused himself for disturbing us and asked: ‘Are you the master here, Sevryuk?’

‘Yes, I am,’ replied Sevryuk. ‘How can I help you?’

The officer turned to his men. ‘Hey, Marchenko!’ he yelled. ‘Bring him here!’

Two dragoons brought out a bare-footed man from behind the horses. His hands were bound behind his back. He wore black soldier’s trousers with faded red piping. They led him to the verandah. He stared at Marina Pavlovna as though he wanted to tell her something.

‘Do you know this fellow?’ asked the officer.

No one said a word.

‘Take a closer look.’

‘No,’ said Marina Pavlovna, the blood draining from her face. ‘I’ve never seen this man before.’

The man shuddered and lowered his eyes.

‘And you?’ the officer asked Sevryuk.

‘No. I don’t know him.’

‘Well, my friend,’ the officer said, turning to the man, ‘it’s nothing but a pack of lies you’ve been telling us about working here on the Sevryuks’ estate. No one but yourself to blame.’

‘All right!’ the man said. ‘Take me away. But don’t think might makes right.’

Marina Pavlovna sprang out of her chair and went back inside the house.

‘That’s enough talk out of you!’ the officer said. ‘Take him away!’

The dragoons rode off. Marina Pavlovna cried for a long time.

‘The way he was looking at me,’ she said through her tears. ‘How did I not see it? I should have said that I knew him and he works here for us.’

‘How could you have guessed?’ Trofim said, trying to comfort her. ‘He could’ve at least given some sort of sign. He certainly gave it to Lyubomirsky. Burned every last thing over there down to the ground, he did, for murdering that boy.’

Soon afterwards I left for Kiev. Polesia remained in my memory as a sad and somewhat enigmatic place. It would go on growing buttercups and sweet flags, its alders and willows would still rustle in the wind, but its church bells, so it seemed, would never call the mute peasants to a joyous celebration. So I thought then. Fortunately, things turned out quite differently.

[1] Grigory Danilevsky (1829–90), author of novels on the history of Ukraine, including this, his first novel (1862).

31

My Grandmother's Garden

Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna had been living in Cherkassy together with Aunt Yevfrosinia Grigorievna. Grandfather had already been dead a long time, and then while I was in Polesia for the summer, Aunt Yevfrosinia died of a heart attack. So, Grandmother Vikentia moved to Kiev to live with one of her other daughters, my Aunt Vera, who was married to a wealthy businessman. Aunt Vera had a large home in Lukyanovka on the edge of the city. They put Grandmother up in a small cottage there in the garden.

After living on her own in Cherkassy, Grandmother felt like some hanger-on in Aunt Vera's grand home. She kept her shame to herself and managed to take a little bit of comfort in the fact that she had her own place, could cook her own meals, and did not have to live under the same roof with, and so feel even more indebted to, her rich daughter.

Grandmother was lonely, and she talked me into leaving Pani Kozlovskaya and coming to live with her in the cottage. There were four small rooms. Grandmother lived in one, an old cellist by the name of Gattenberger lived in another, and I was given the third room. Even though it was called the sun porch, the fourth room was cold and had nothing in it but flowerpots covering the whole floor.

When I returned from Polesia in the middle of the summer the city was empty. Everyone had moved to their dachas. Borya had left for an internship in Yekaterinoslav. The only people at Lukyanovka were Grandmother Vikentia Ivanovna and Gattenberger.

Grandmother had aged a great deal. She was bent over and had lost her former strict demeanour, but nonetheless she had not given up her old habits. She still rose at dawn every day, flung the windows wide open and then made herself coffee over a spirit lamp. After her coffee, she went out into the garden, sat down in her wicker chair and read her favourite books – countless novels by Kraszewski or the stories of Korolenko and Eliza Orzeszkowa.[1] She often fell asleep over a book – her grey head drooping, dressed all in black, her thin arms lying at her side. Butterflies settled on her arms and her black widow's cap. Soft, ripe plums fell from the trees and landed in the grass with a muffled thud. A warm breeze blew through the garden, scattering shadows of leaves along the paths. High over Grandmother's head shone the sun – the bright hot sun of the Kiev summer – and I would think to myself as I watched her that one day Grandmother would fall asleep for good here in the fresh warmth of this garden.

We were friends. I loved her more than any of my other relations. She felt the same way about me. Grandmother had raised three daughters and two sons, but now in her old age she was all alone. We were both lonely and this helped to bring us together. Grandmother radiated kindness and melancholy. Despite the difference in age, we had a lot in common. She loved poetry, books, trees, the sky and daydreams. She never forced me to do anything.

Grandmother's only weakness was that at the slightest sign of a cold she forced on me her own well-tried remedy which she called 'the spiritus'. It was devilish stuff. She took wine, wood alcohol and liquid ammonia and mixed them together with turpentine and any other spirits she could get her hands on. It was a blood-red liquid, as caustic as nitric acid. Grandmother rubbed this 'spiritus' all over my chest and back. She was convinced of its healing properties. A harsh, burning smell filled the cottage. Gattenberger immediately lit a fat cigar, and the fog of its pleasant bluish smoke chased the acrid aroma from his room.

It was usually when Gattenberger was playing the cello that Grandmother fell asleep in the garden. Gattenberger was a handsome old man with a curly white beard and piercing grey eyes. He liked to play one of his own compositions by the name of 'The Death of Hamlet'. The cello sobbed, and the cascade of chords, as though reverberating beneath the vaults of Elsinore, rose to a solemn climax: 'Let four captains bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage.'

Listening to the music, I imagined the great hall at Elsinore, the narrow Gothic shafts of sunlight, the fanfare, and over Hamlet's dead body enormous banners – tall and light, reaching to the floor and rustling softly. The stream had long ago borne Ophelia's bouquet down to the sea. Far from shore a halo of rosemary and rue, the last symbol of her bitter love, drifted among the waves. This too one heard in

the music of his cello.

Grandmother woke up and said: 'My God, can't you play something cheery?'

To please her, Gattenberger would then play her favourite pastorale from *The Queen of Spades*: 'My tender friend, my darling shepherd . . .'

Music wearied Grandmother. She got a rest from it in the evening when Gattenberger left with his cello to play with the orchestra in the Merchants' Park. I often went to the concerts. The orchestra played in an expansive white wooden bandshell and the audience sat under the open sky. Large beds with stocks and nicotiana gave off a strong, sweet smell in the twilight. The beds were watered before every concert. The musicians sat under bright lights; the audience in utter darkness. The women's white dresses glimmered faintly, the trees swayed, and now and then summer lightning flashed over our heads. I especially loved those damp, overcast evenings when only a few people came to the concerts in the park. It seemed as if the orchestra was playing just for me and a girl in a floppy hat. I saw her at almost every concert. She always gave me a look. I watched her furtively. Once she caught me looking at her, and I thought I saw her eyes flash with a mischievous fire.

That boring summer in Kiev began to fill with dreams of this unknown girl, and soon I was no longer bored. Even the loud echoing of the rain that summer now seemed full of life and excitement. The rain pounded the garden's greenery with a fury from on high. The glass drops, flying from the clouds, seemed to strike the keys of a musical instrument, sending chords of sound into my room. It seemed like a true miracle that ordinary water – the kind that drips off a roof into a green tub – could sing in such a way.

'All summer, nothing but rain and more rain!' said Grandmother. 'Well, at least it's good for the crops.'

Somewhere beyond the light haze of these 'blinding rains' and the shimmer of the rainbows lived the unknown girl. I was grateful to her for appearing in my life and changing everything around me. Even the city's yellow-brick pavement with its little puddles became beautiful and wondrous, like something out of a tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Grass sprouted in the cracks between the bricks, and ants struggled through the puddles.

When I entered into the depths of my fantasy world or, as my grandmother, using the Polish, called them, my '*marzenia*', I thought everything was amazing, even the pavements of Kiev. Even now I don't know what to call this state of mind. It came from a number of invisible sources. There was not an ounce of exultation in it. Just the opposite, it was accompanied by a sense of peace and calm, and it disappeared at the first sign of worry. This mood demanded expression, and it was during that hot summer with its 'blinding rains' that I began to write.

I hid this from Grandmother. She was surprised that I had been spending hour after hour alone in my room writing, so I told her that I was taking notes on the books I had read in preparation for my literature classes in the autumn.

When there were no concerts in the Merchants' Park, I went off to the Dnieper or to a neglected park called 'Cheer Up' on the edge of the city which belonged to a patron of the arts by the name of Kulzhenko. For a few cigarettes, the keeper let me into the park – it was completely empty and overgrown with weeds. The ponds were choked with duckweed. Jackdaws chattered in the trees. The rotting benches swayed and buckled when I tried to sit down. The only person I ever encountered in the park was an old artist. He sat sketching under a large linen umbrella. He always gave me angry looks, and so I made certain never to go near him.

I liked to go to a deserted house deep in the park to sit and read on the steps of the verandah. Sparrows flitted about behind me. I often put my book down to look out into the park. Smoky shafts of light filtered through the trees. I waited. I was certain that here, in this park, I would meet her, the stranger. But she never came, and I returned home, taking the most roundabout way – on the tram through Priorka and Podol, then along Kreshchatik and Proreznaya Street. Along the way I stopped to visit the Idzikovskaya Library on Kreshchatik. It was always empty in the summer. The young assistants working there exchanged my books. Their faces were pale from the heat and sweat glistened on their moustaches. I borrowed books for Grandmother and myself. Given my condition at the time, all I could read was poetry. For Grandmother I brought home novels by Spielhagen and Bolesław Prus.[2]

I arrived home at Lukyanovka tired and happy, my face glowing from the sun and fresh air. Grandmother was waiting for me. She had supper ready in her room on a small round table covered with a tablecloth. I told her about 'Cheer Up' Park. She nodded as she listened. Now and then she said that she had had a long and lonely day at home, but not once did she scold me for having disappeared like that. 'Youth has its own laws,' said Grandmother. 'It's not my place to interfere with them.'

I went to my room, undressed and lay down in my narrow bed. My lamp lit the crooked branches of the apple tree just outside my window. Yielding to the embrace of a fragile sleep, I could sense the night around me, its darkness and infinite quiet. I loved nighttime, even though I was terrified by the thought

that in the stillness above Lukyanovka and our cottage, Sagittarius and Aquarius, Gemini and Virgo were passing by far overhead.

I wrote a short story about that summer in Kiev. I included everything in it: the cellist Gattenberger, the girl from the Merchants' Park, 'Cheer Up', the nights, and a dreamy, somewhat ridiculous boy. I worked hard on it for a long time. The harder I worked the less defined my words became; they became mushy and soft like cotton wool. I had crammed the story with so many beautiful things that even I found it rather overwrought. At times I gave way to despair.

At the time there was a magazine in Kiev with the strange title of *The Knight*. Its editor was the famous local writer and lover of the arts Yevgeny Kuzmin. I hesitated for a long time, but eventually screwed up my courage and took my story to *The Knight*'s editorial office. It was located in Kuzmin's flat. A small, polite schoolboy opened the door and showed me to Kuzmin's study. A spotted bulldog sat drooling on the rug and looked up at me with diseased eyes. The room was stuffy. There was the smell of scented candles. The white masks of Greek gods and goddesses hung on the black walls. Everywhere stood large piles of books in dried-out leather bindings.

I waited. I could hear the crackling of the leather books. Kuzmin entered – he was very tall and very thin and had long white fingers with shiny silver rings on them. He spoke to me respectfully, his head bowed. I blushed and tried to work out how I could get out of there. I was now convinced that my story was terrible and that I was an inarticulate fool. Kuzmin leafed through my story with his limp fingers, pausing to mark something with a long, sharp fingernail.

'My periodical', he said, 'is a forum for young writers. I would very much like to find one more worthy contributor. I'll read your story and send you a postcard.'

'If it's no trouble, please send your reply in an envelope.'

Kuzmin gave me a knowing smile and nodded.

I left. Gasping for breath, I raced down the stairs and out into the street. Men were out washing down the pavement with hoses. The water chugged and gurgled, and some of it splashed me in the face. I felt a bit better. I jumped on a moving tram to get away from there as quickly as possible. The passengers looked up and began to laugh at me. I jumped off and walked.

Dust from hay and firewood hung in the air over the Senny Market. Identical round clouds sailed above Lvovskaya Street. There was a sharp smell of horse manure. An old grey horse pulled a cart with bags of coal. Alongside walked a man with a coal-black face. From time to time he called out in a doleful voice: 'Coal? Anybody need any coal?'

I remembered my story, with its purple prose and vague notions about life, lying there on the desk back in Kuzmin's stuffy office. I felt ashamed of myself and swore never to write another story. 'It's all wrong, it's all wrong!' I said over and over. 'But then, even if it's bad, maybe there's something there in it?'

I didn't know a thing and was utterly lost.

I turned onto Glubochitskaya Street in the direction of Podol. Cobblers sat out in the cold hammering the soles of old shoes. Every time their hammers fell, the aged leather released little puffs of dust. Boys fired stones at sparrows with their catapults. A cart carried flour. The bags had holes in them and flour spilled onto the road. Women hung up coloured clothes on lines in the back gardens. The wind was blowing, sending litter high up into the air over Podol. On the hill, St Andrew's Church – Rastrelli's magnificent creation – with its silver domes and red columns glittered in the sun. I went into a tavern and drank a glass of sour wine. It didn't help me feel any better.

I returned home with a headache early that evening. Grandmother immediately rubbed me down with 'spiritus' and put me to bed. I was certain that I had made an irreparable mistake – I had written an atrocious story and as a result had ruined any chance of ever writing again for the rest of my life. I knew no one who could tell me what I was to do next. Was it truly possible to give all of yourself to what you loved most, only to discover that your efforts were futile?

Gattenberger was playing softly in his room. He no longer played 'The Death of Hamlet', but selections from a new composition, 'A Feast During the Plague'. He had been working on this for some time and played parts of it for Grandmother and me. As always, Grandmother was astounded by Gattenberger's love of gloomy themes.

'One minute it's death, the next it's the plague!' she complained. 'I just don't understand it. I think music should make people happy.'

Gattenberger had come to his favourite part:

> And pitiful moans resounded long and loud
> Along the banks of the streams and brooks,

Which now run peacefully and happily
Through the wild paradise of your native land!

'That's better,' I muttered. 'There's truth in that – "Through the wild paradise of your native land".'

Wild paradise! These words hit me like a healing wind. In a word, I knew what I had to do. I had to strive, I had to work, to persevere. I knew the path would be long and hard, but for some reason this knowledge calmed me.

Two days later Kuzmin's postcard arrived. He had ignored my request to send it in a sealed envelope. He wrote that he had read my story and was publishing it in the next issue of the magazine. Grandmother had, of course, read the postcard. It had made her cry.

'Your father, Georgy Maximovich, used to laugh at me, but he was a good man,' she said. 'I'm sorry he didn't live to see this.' She made the sign of the cross over me and then gave me a kiss. 'Well, work hard and be happy. I see now that God took pity on me and sent me this joy late in my life.'

She was more excited about my first story than I was.

When *The Knight* came out with my story in it, Grandmother baked a mazurek cake and prepared a special celebratory breakfast. She even put on her black silk dress that morning, which she typically only wore for Easter. She pinned to her breast a small corsage of artificial heliotropes. In the past the dress had made her look young, but not anymore. Nevertheless, when she looked at me, I could see that her eyes were filled with joy.

As we ate, wasps buzzed around the jam jar. Gattenberger guessed somehow what had happened and struck up a mazurka by Wieniawski,[3] beating time with his foot as he played.

[1] Józef Ignacy Kraszewski (1812–87), prolific Polish novelist, historian and journalist; Vladimir Korolenko (1853–1921), Ukrainian-Russian writer and political activist; Eliza Orzeszkowa (*née* Elžbieta Pawłowska) (1841–1910), noted Polish writer and social activist.

[2] Friedrich Spielhagen (1829–1911), German novelist whose works were popular in Russia; Aleksander Głowacki (1847–1912) (pen name Bolesław Prus), Polish novelist and short story writer.

[3] Henryk Wieniawski (1835–80), Polish composer and violinist.

32

‘Golden Latin’

Our Latin teacher, Suboch, looked at me with wide eyes. His moustache quivered. ‘You! A boy in the eighth form! The Devil knows what you’re up to! I ought to give you a failing mark in comportment. Then you’d sing a different tune!’

Suboch was right. The trick or, as we called it, ‘psychological experiment’ that we had carried out in the Latin class could only be described by the words ‘the Devil knows what’.

At one time six pictures had hung on the classroom walls. They had been taken down long ago, but the large metal hooks had remained. The hooks gave us an idea for some fun, which we carried it out with skill and panache.

Suboch was an intense man. He always exploded into our classroom like a meteor, his coat tails flying, his pince-nez flashing, his mark book whizzing through the air and landing perfectly in the centre of his desk with a thud. Little swirls of dust followed in his wake. The class jumped to its feet with a clatter of slamming desk lids and then sat down just as noisily. The glass in the door and windows rattled, startling the sparrows in the poplars outside and sending them flying off into the depths of the garden.

This was how Suboch arrived every day. He stopped, removed a tiny notebook from his pocket, brought it up close to his myopic eyes and then froze, a pencil quivering slightly in his other hand. A threatening silence replaced the storm of his entrance. Suboch scanned his notebook for his next victim.

One morning, six of the lightest and smallest of the boys, including myself, were hung by our belts from the metal hooks. The pain was excruciating: the hooks dug into our backs, taking our breath away. Suboch flew into the classroom. Just then all the other boys jumped into the rows between the desks and flipped head over heels to form several lines of handstands. Suboch was racing at full speed and couldn’t stop. He flung the mark book onto the desk and at that very moment, just as the book landed, all the boys returned to their feet with a giant bang and sat down. The six of us up on the walls undid our belts, fell to the floor, and quickly took our seats. An ominous, ringing silence filled the air. Complete order reigned in the classroom. We sat at our desks with innocent expressions as if nothing had happened.

Suboch began to rant. We denied everything. With polite insistence we maintained that nothing had happened – no one had hung from the walls, no one had executed a handstand. We even hinted that Suboch might be suffering from delusions.

He began to shake. He called the six of us who had been hanging on the wall up to his desk. He looked us over suspiciously from all sides but found no traces of plaster on our uniforms. Suboch shrugged. He inspected the hooks and the floor, but here too he found nothing suspicious. A look of alarm spread across his face: Suboch was always worrying about his health.

He ordered one of the boys to fetch Supervisor Platon Fëdorovich. The boy went out and soon returned with the supervisor.

‘Did you hear anything unusual at the beginning of the lesson?’ Suboch asked him.

‘No,’ replied Platon Fëdorovich.

‘No noise, no crashing?’

‘There’s always some noise when the boys stand up and sit down . . .’ Platon Fëdorovich answered cautiously. He had a puzzled look on his face.

‘Thank you,’ said Suboch. ‘I had the impression that something strange was going on in the classroom.’

‘What exactly?’ he asked in an insinuating tone.

Suboch lost his temper. ‘Nothing!’ he snapped. ‘Please excuse me for troubling you.’

Platon Fëdorovich held up his hands in a helpless gesture and then walked out.

‘Nobody move,’ Suboch told us, picking up his mark book. ‘I shall be right back.’

He left and soon returned with Inspector Varsonofy Nikolaevich, known by the nickname Varsapont. Varsapont looked at us closely and then walked over to the wall, climbed up on a desk, and went to pull on one of the hooks. It popped out of the wall before he had barely touched it. ‘Well, well!’ he said cryptically, and then stuck it back in the wall.

We were all watching him.

‘Well, well,’ Varsapont repeated. ‘What exactly is going on here? Yes, well, well,’ he repeated himself

now for the third time, and then shook his head and left the classroom.

Suboch sat down and stared for a long time at his mark book without moving. Then he jumped up and tore out of the room. The door shook behind him. The sparrows scattered once again from their perches in the poplars. A draught rustled the pages of our textbooks. We sat there trying our best not to move until the end of the class hour. We were alarmed by the success of our 'psychological experiment' and worried we might have driven Suboch out of his mind.

In the end, however, nothing so tragic had occurred. Rumours of our 'experiment' spread throughout the school and elicited envious admiration. The form below us decided to repeat the experiment on one of their instructors, but, as is well known, a work of true genius can never be reproduced. Their attempt ended in disastrous failure.

Suboch found out and flew into a rage. He harangued us in a manner worthy of Cicero's famous speech: 'When, O Cataline, do you mean to cease abusing our patience? How long is that madness of yours still to mock us?' He used his speech for a purpose none of us foresaw. Suboch made us feel ashamed not for making fun of him, but for acting so disrespectfully during a lesson devoted to what he called 'Golden Latin', the most magnificent of all the world's languages.

'Latin!' he thundered. 'The language of Ovid and Horace! Of Livy and Lucretius! Of Marcus Aurelius and Julius Caesar! The language venerated by the great poets, by Pushkin and Dante, by Goethe and Shakespeare! And not only did they venerate it, they knew it, and much better than the likes of you. Golden Latin! Every word of Latin could be cast in pure gold, and you wouldn't lose a rouble either, for there isn't an ounce of waste in the entire language. It's utterly pure. And you? Just look at what you've done! You dare to mock it. You dare to turn your Latin class into a circus. Your heads are stuffed with nothing but nonsense. With rubbish! Jokes! Football! Snooker! Smoking! Pranks! Moving pictures! Balderdash! Shame on all of you!'

Suboch roared. We were crushed by the weight of his accusations and the picture of our complete worthlessness. But we were also offended. Most of us, in fact, knew our Latin very well.

An armistice was soon concluded, and then we experienced 'Golden Latin's' most glorious triumph. We did everything possible to make it up to Suboch and worked doubly hard. We got to know Suboch better and became very fond of him. Finally, the unforgettable day came when Suboch had to admit that every boy he called to the board deserved top marks.

'I am going to put this down to pure good fortune,' he said, grinning into his moustache.

The next day he tried to trip us up on our 'unseens', but again he was forced to give each one of us a perfect mark. Suboch beamed. But his joy was overshadowed by a cloud of concern, for such a thing had never happened to him before. It was some sort of miracle. And then, after the third day running when again each of us earned top marks, Suboch became distraught. Our brilliant knowledge of Latin had acquired the appearance of a scandal. The whole school was talking about it. Ugly rumours began to spread. Evil tongues were whispering that Suboch was giving us better marks than we deserved so he could unjustly claim the reputation of being the school's best Latin teacher.

'It appears', Suboch said in an uncertain voice, 'that I ought to give four or five of you boys something less than top marks today. What do you think?'

Offended, we didn't say a word. It seemed to us as though Suboch would be happy if one of us now failed. Perhaps he even regretted making that inspired speech of his about 'Golden Latin'. But we couldn't unlearn what we already knew. None of us would volunteer to fail our Latin examination just to shut the mouths of gossipers. We had put our hearts and souls into our studies, and we had enjoyed it.

In the end, Suboch surrendered to the general suspicion and arranged for a public demonstration. He invited the vice-chairman of the District School Board, the school's director, Inspector Varsapont and Father Olendsky, an expert in Latin, to come and observe one of our lessons. Suboch was merciless and cunning in his attempts to trip us up and find the holes in our knowledge. But we fought back bravely, parrying each of his blows, and passed the test in spectacular fashion. The director laughed and rubbed his hands with glee. Varsapont ruffled his hair in disbelief. The vice-chairman smiled condescendingly, and Father Olendsky shook his grey head. 'Oh, just look at you little polyglots! Oh, you little cheats, Oh, aren't you clever!' he said.

After that we lost our momentum. We simply couldn't maintain that level of intensity. The days when every last one of us received top marks were over. Nevertheless, Suboch's renown as the school's finest Latin instructor remained intact. Nothing could undo that.

33

Instructors of the Humanities

Shulgin, our Russian literature teacher, an elegant old man with a luxuriant white beard and blue eyes, was known for one unusual personal trait: he simply could not stand nonsensical remarks. If he heard the least bit of foolishness, he immediately flew into a rage. He went red in the face, grabbed textbooks and tore them to shreds or, clenching his fists, shook them in the face of some terrified schoolboy with such ferocity that you could hear his round cufflinks clank violently: 'You! Yes, you! Get out, now! Please, go! Get out!'

These fits were followed by complete exhaustion. He was ill, of course. We knew it, and so did the teachers and the supervisors. If a fit went on too long, Platon Fëdorovich tiptoed into the classroom, took Shulgin gently by the shoulders and led him to the teachers' common room. There he was revived with essence of valerian.

By nature Shulgin was a gentle and kind old man. His understanding of Russian literature was primitive and uninspiring. His system of handing out marks was haphazard. All the younger boys had to do to improve a poor mark was to cry on his shoulder. One day in class Shulgin had us write an essay on the hackneyed theme of 'Feminine Types in the Works of Turgenev'. Unexpectedly, Gudim, a cheeky and affected boy whose hands were always smeared with ink, cried out: 'The parrots have returned and just landed on the boulevard!'

It was the kind of nonsense calculated to drive Shulgin mad. The fit began that instant. Shulgin grabbed Gudim and shook him so hard that the boy's head started bouncing off the wall behind his desk. Next, he tore at Gudim's uniform, ripping off the gold buttons in the process.

Matusevich held Shulgin's arms while another boy ran off to get Platon Fëdorovich. Shulgin sat down on a desk, clutched his head and sobbed. For many of us the sight was too much, and we raised the lids of our desks and hid. A frightened Inspector Varsapont and Platon Fëdorovich appeared, and together they took Shulgin away. The room was deadly quiet. Stanishevsky stood up. He was very pale. He walked slowly over to Gudim and said: 'You bastard! Get out of here now! Or you're dead. Understand?'

Gudim gave him a wicked grin and didn't move from his desk. Stanishevsky grabbed him by the front of his uniform, pulled him up and then threw him on the floor. Gudim got up. The classroom remained silent.

'Understand?' Stanishevsky repeated.

Gudim walked unsteadily to the door. He stopped before leaving. He wanted to say something but saw our cold, angry looks. Dropping his head, he slunk out. He never came back. He couldn't have even if he wanted to – the school's moral code was ruthless. No exceptions were made. Gudim's parents removed him from the gymnasium and sent him to Valker's Technical School, a refuge for hooligans and idlers.

Shulgin also never came back. He was ill for a long time, but even after he recovered his doctors forbade him from teaching. Sometimes we ran into him in Nikolaevskaya Square. He liked to sit there and sun himself, resting his chin on the pommel of his walking stick while children played on the sand around him. We always bowed to Shulgin, but he just looked at us with terror in his eyes and said nothing.

We had no better luck with our next Russian literature teacher. Trostyansky was a tall, conceited man with a pale face. According to him, all Russia's writers could be divided into two categories – decent men worthy of study and lower-class seditionists whose wasted talent was to be pitied and best not spoken of. Trostyansky annoyed us. In the essays we wrote for him we overthrew his gods and elevated his villains. Smiling politely, he tried to explain to us in a quiet voice that we were mistaken and gave us low marks.

Trostyansky was replaced by Selikhanovich, who taught psychology as well as Russian literature. He looked like the poet Bryusov[1] and wore a black frock coat buttoned up to his chin. He was a sensitive and talented man. He 'washed' Russian literature before us just like expert art restorers wash old paintings. He cleaned away the dust and grime of decades' worth of inaccurate interpretations, classroom boredom, clichés and petty judgements. Many of us were shocked at what we now saw before us – here was a literature of magnificent colours, of profound meaning, of rare truth the likes of which we had never noticed before.

We learned a great deal from Selikhanovich, and not only Russian literature. He introduced us to the Renaissance, to nineteenth-century European philosophy, to the fairytales of Hans Christian Andersen and to the poetry of *The Lay of Igor*, whose Old Slavonic text we had up until then just mindlessly memorised for our examinations.

Selikhanovich had rare descriptive powers. He talked about the most complex philosophical theories in such a way that made them clear and easily grasped, and he filled one with wonder at the enormous powers of the human mind. Philosophers, writers, scholars and poets, whose names had meant nothing to us other than a string of dates and 'Services to Humanity' to be memorised, became living people. Selikhanovich showed us that they had never existed on their own but had belonged to concrete historical epochs.

In his lectures on Gogol, Selikhanovich conjured up for us the Rome of his time – its streets, hills and ruins, its artists and carnivals, its very air and the blue of its sky. A line of amazing men and women all connected to Rome and its history paraded before our eyes, brought to life by a magic power that was both simple and available to everyone. This power was nothing other than knowledge, passion and imagination.

We passed from one epoch to another, from one interesting place to another. Through the study of literature, Selikhanovich took us everywhere – from the armouries of Tula to the Cossack outposts on the border with Dagestan, from a drizzly autumn day at Boldino to the orphanages and debtors' prisons of Dickensian England, from the markets of Paris to Chopin's sick bed in an ancient monastery on the island of Majorca, and even to lonely Taman where the sea wind rustled through the fields of maize.

We loved learning about the lives of those writers who had taught us so much about our country and the world and our notions of beauty – Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Herzen, Ryleev,[2] Chekhov, Dickens, Balzac and so many others. All this knowledge filled us with pride in the power of the human spirit and of art.

Along the way, Selikhanovich taught us other things as well, such as manners and tact. He liked to pose problems. 'A few people are sitting in a room,' he once said. 'All the chairs are occupied. A woman walks in. You can see she's been crying. What should a gentleman do?'

We replied that he must of course get up and offer her his chair.

'And what would someone who was both polite and tactful do?' he asked.

We had no idea.

'Give her the chair with its back to the light so her eyes aren't so clearly visible,' said Selikhanovich.

What astonished me about Selikhanovich was what he said upon learning of my wish to become a writer: 'Do you have the perseverance for it?'

I hadn't thought of it as a necessary trait in being a writer. Later I learned that he had been right.

One day he stopped me in the corridor and said: 'Come to Balmont's lecture tomorrow.[3] It's imperative that if you want to write prose you must know poetry as well.'

I went to Balmont's lecture. The title was 'Poetry as Magic'. It was hot and crowded inside the Merchants' Assembly. The candles of two bronze candelabras burned on a small table covered with a green velvet cloth.

Balmont came out. He was wearing a frock coat with a flowing silk tie. A humble camomile peeped out of the hole on his lapel. His thinning yellowish hair fell in soft curls around his collar. He fixed his eyes on a point over our heads in a manner that was both mysterious and haughty. Balmont was no longer a young man. He spoke in a slow, leisurely voice. After every sentence he paused and listened to his own words, like a pianist with a foot on the loud pedal listening to the vibration of a chord.

After the interval Balmont recited some of his verse. It seemed to me that his poems contained all that wondrous musicality of the Russian language –

> In the deserted woods, a cuckoo cries tenderly,
> So full of longing, of strangeness, the sound of its entreaty.
> Springtime, to me, at once mournful and happy,
> And the beauty of this world an unexpected glory.

He spoke with his small reddish beard pointed up to the ceiling, and his words broke over the auditorium in waves –

> Like some distant patter of feet, I catch a murmur outside my window,
> A strange, unintelligible whispering – the whispering of raindrops.

Balmont finished. The pendants of the chandeliers vibrated from the applause. He raised a hand, and

everyone fell silent. ‘I am going to read to you “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe,’ he said. ‘But first I want to tell you a story which shows how fate is, at times, kind to us poets. When Poe died and was buried in Baltimore, his relatives erected an unbelievably heavy tombstone over his grave. These Godfearing Quakers, so it seems, wanted to be certain that the poet’s rebellious spirit remained in the grave and had no chance of coming back to disturb the peace of honest hard-working Americans. But when they placed this stone on Poe’s grave, it broke. And so it lies there to this very day, and every spring pansies grow in the cracks of this stone.’

Balmont began to read ‘The Raven’. The gloomy splendour of the poem filled the hall. It was as if we had magically left Kiev for some dark, snow-covered plain buffeted by a howling wind. The iron clang of ‘Nevermore’ fell into the emptiness of that night like the striking of a tower clock.

‘Nevermore!’ His mind could not accept it. Nevermore? Would Virginia nevermore walk the earth and would she nevermore knock lightly, shyly on the heavy door? Would there nevermore be youth, love and happiness? ‘Nevermore!’ cawed the raven, and this little forgotten man, this great American poet, shrank from loneliness in his worn armchair and looked with the eyes of a sick child into the cold abyss.

All my life I have been grateful to Selikhanovich for awakening my love of poetry. It was poetry that revealed to me the richness of language. In verse words were reborn, they acquired their full power. The enormous world of poetic imagery entered into my consciousness as if a blindfold had been removed from my eyes.

While Selikhanovich was introducing us to literature and philosophy, old man Klyachin was opening our eyes to the history of western Europe. Thin, with a bulging Adam’s apple, screwed-up and rather weak eyes, always unshaven and his frock coat unbuttoned, Klyachin spoke in a hoarse voice. He spat out his words in quick, short bursts, like lumps of clay, which he used to create lifelike statues of Danton, Babeuf, Marat, Napoleon, Louis-Philippe, Gambetta. We could hear the indignation in his throat when he talked about the coup of 9 Thermidor or the treachery of Thiers. He would get so carried away he’d light a cigarette and then catch himself and immediately put it out on the closest desk.

Klyachin was an authority on the French Revolution. That a school like ours even tolerated such a teacher was something of a mystery. Sometimes he became so overcome with emotion it seemed that he had forgotten he was talking to a group of schoolboys and not the deputies of the National Convention. He was a living anachronism and at the same time the most progressive of all our teachers. At times he seemed to us to be the last of the Montagnards – an ancient creature who had miraculously lived to a hundred and ended up in Kiev. Somehow, he had escaped the guillotine and death in the swamps of Guyana and not lost an ounce of his burning fervour.

Once in a while Klyachin was too tired to talk about the revolution, and so he talked to us about Paris in those times – the streets and buildings, the type of lamps they used to light the squares at night, what the women wore, the songs sung by the common folk, what the newspapers looked like. Hearing him talk, many of us wished we could go back a hundred years and see for ourselves those great events which he had described to us.

[1] Valery Bryusov (1873–1924), Symbolist poet and writer.

[2] Kondraty Ryleev (1795–1826), poet and leader of the Decembrist Revolt of 1825.

[3] Konstantin Balmont (1867–1942), Symbolist poet, translator of Poe’s ‘The Raven’.

34

A Shot in the Theatre

The polished parquet in the Assembly Hall was like a calm lake reflecting blue rows of schoolboys, in bright-buttoned uniforms, and flickering chandeliers. A low murmur reverberated in the hall and then died suddenly. In walked a short colonel with pale, protruding eyes, his spurs jangling. He stopped and stared at us. There came the brassy sound of bugles. We stood to attention.

The colonel – Nicholas II – was followed by a tall, thin woman, nodding left and right, in a stiff white dress and an enormous hat sprouting ostrich feathers. The woman's face was lifeless, malicious and beautiful. It was Empress Alexandra.

Behind the empress in single file came their daughters. They had thin pale lips and were wearing equally stiff white dresses. The dresses didn't crease or fold as they walked and looked as if they had been made of cardboard. Following the little girls – the grand duchesses – waddled an enormous lady, rustling loudly in a lilac dress with black lace and a satin sash across her chest, a gold-rimmed pince-nez on the tip of her nose – old Lady in Waiting Naryshkina. The fat bulged over her tight silks. She fanned herself with a little lace handkerchief.

So began the centenary celebration of our gymnasium.

The royal suite blocked our view of Nicholas. All we could see was the carefully plastered hair around the ministers' bald spots, scarlet ribbons, white trousers with gold braid, patent leather shoes held tightly in place with foot straps, the generals' *sharovary* and silver sashes.

Nedelsky, our school's finest elocutionist, welcomed the tsar with a poem of his own composition. He spoke in a loud, dry voice and addressed the tsar with the informal '*ty*'. Then the suite parted, leaving a wide passage through which Nicholas approached us. He stopped, rubbed his light brown beard and said slowly and with a slight burr: 'Greetings, gentlemen.'

We answered – distinctly but not too loudly – as we had been instructed: 'We wish Your Imperial Majesty good health!'

Being the shortest boy in the top form, I was standing at the end of my row. Nicholas came up to me. His cheek twitched slightly. He gave me a distracted look and smiled, but only with his eyes. 'What's your name?'

I answered.

'Are you Ukrainian?'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

He looked me over with a brief, bored glance and moved on to my neighbour. He stopped to ask each of us our names. A concert followed the inspection. Since the tsar listened standing up, so did we.

Nicholas made it quite clear that he was bored with the gala reception and had no intention of wasting his time on some school concert. He kept plucking impatiently at the glove he had removed from his right hand. The concert was cut short. The school orchestra played 'Glory, Glory to Our Russian Tsar', someone recited the 'Song of Oleg' and the choir sang a cantata.

The whole event was boring and pointless. The ministers yawned behind the tsar's back. It was too painful to watch the musicians, who were quaking with fear, so we watched the ministers and the rest of the suite instead. We were shocked by the difference between the tsar and the men around him. Nicholas looked plain and even a bit awkward. He was lost amid his large suite that flashed and gleamed in their silver and gold, in their tall polished boots, epaulettes, sword knots, spurs, pelisses and medals. Even when the courtiers stood still, a faint ringing could be heard from all their regalia and weaponry.

Nicholas listened to the concert with a stony expression and then left. He was not satisfied. He had a score to settle with our school. Two days earlier a former pupil named Bogrov had shot Minister Stolypin in the Opera House, mortally wounding him. Of this I shall say more later.

On our centenary it had been decided to promote the school from the rank of a 'gymnasium' to that of a 'lycée'. An edict to that effect had been prepared. But after the shooting in the theatre it was no longer deemed fitting for a gymnasium that had turned out political criminals to be granted the special privileges and prestige of a lycée. And so instead our school received nothing more than a new name – the Imperial Alexander Gymnasium, in honour of Emperor Alexander I – and a new coat of arms with a

large ‘A’ and crown. The boys at Kiev’s other gymnasia liked to make fun of our rather pompous new coat of arms, which led to more than a few brawls. We boys in the top form refused to change our old school badges for the new ones. The school officials objected, but we insisted that we didn’t have the money for new badges and buckles. In the end, the officials let the matter go. We just weren’t worth the effort considering we would soon be leaving school.

All sorts of festivities were arranged in honour of Nicholas’s visit to Kiev. An ugly bronze statue of Alexander II was unveiled and even uglier plaster statues of Saint Olga and Saints Cyril and Methodius. Military manoeuvres were conducted on the outskirts of the city. Everywhere one looked there were inaugurations, pageants, processions, ceremonial illuminations. Flags hung from every house and building for the whole week of the tsar’s stay.

After a horse race, the boys and girls from all Kiev’s gymnasia were paraded around the track. We kicked up a cloud of dust as we passed in front of Nicholas. The setting sun was in our eyes. We couldn’t see a thing and mixed up our ranks. A military band blew with all its might. Our school distinguished itself by forgetting to acknowledge the tsar’s greeting. A full general in the army galloped up and gave us a dressing down. His chestnut steed had flattened its ears and stamped angrily as the general jerked at the reins.

A gala performance was planned for the Opera House which Nicholas would be attending. Boys and girls in the top forms from a number of schools, including ours, were also invited. We were led up a dark back stairway to the gallery and locked in. We could not leave and go down to the lower tiers. A few decent but rather brazen police officers were stationed at the doors. When some pretty schoolgirl wanted to get out of the gallery, they’d give each other a sly wink and let her pass.

I was sitting in the back row and couldn’t see a thing. It was very hot. My head practically touched the ceiling. Not until the interval was I able to push my way up to the front. I leaned over the railing and looked out into the hall. It was veiled in a light haze through which I made out flashes of colour from the reflection of so many diamonds and jewels. The imperial box was empty; Nicholas and the rest of the royal family had moved to the *avant-loge*.

Ministers and courtiers were standing by the railing separating the hall from the orchestra pit. I stood looking down and listening to the murmur of voices. The musicians in their black frock coats were sitting in front of their music stands but none of them were bothering to tune their instruments as usual. Suddenly, there was a loud crack. The musicians jumped to their feet. There was another crack. I didn’t realise it was gunshots. The boys standing beside me shouted: ‘Look! He fell right on the floor!’

‘Who?’

‘Stolypin. Right there, next to the railing!’

I looked. The theatre was now strangely quiet. By the railing a tall man with a bushy black beard and a sash over his shoulder was sitting on the floor. He was grasping at the railing as if he wanted to grab hold and pull himself up. The space around Stolypin was empty.

A young man in a tail-coat was walking away from Stolypin towards the exit. I couldn’t see his face from where I stood. All I noticed was that he was in no hurry and walked calmly. Someone began to scream. There was a thud. An officer had jumped out of the lower boxes and grabbed the young man by the arm. They were immediately surrounded by a crowd.

‘Everyone out of the gallery!’ I heard one of the policemen say behind me.

They hurried us out into the corridor. The doors to the hall were closed. We stood there with no idea what was happening. We could hear a muffled hum coming from the hall. It died down, and then the orchestra played ‘God Save the Tsar’.

‘He’s killed Stolypin,’ Fitsovsky whispered to me.

‘No talking! Leave the theatre at once!’ shouted a police officer.

We went down the same dark set of stairs and out into the brightly lit square. The square was empty. Lines of mounted police were moving the crowds outside the theatre away and down into the side streets, farther and farther back. The horses stamped their feet nervously, the sound echoing down the streets and filling the square. A bugle sounded. An ambulance carriage drove into the square at a swinging trot and stopped in front of the theatre. A few medical orderlies jumped out and raced up the steps carrying a stretcher.

We began to leave the square. We walked slowly because we wanted to see what would happen next. The police tried to move us along, but they looked so confused themselves that we didn’t bother to pay them any attention. We saw Stolypin carried out on a stretcher. The orderlies placed him inside the carriage, and then they took off down Vladimirskaya Street with a police escort galloping alongside.

I returned home to Lukyanovka and told Grandmother and Gattenberger that Stolypin had been murdered. Grandmother said it was never right to shoot in a theatre since innocent people could be hurt.

Gattenberger became all excited, puffed agitatedly on his cigar, said that the scoundrel Stolypin should have been killed sooner, and then raced off to the city centre for the latest news. He returned after midnight and told us that straw had been laid down all along Malaya Vladimirskaya Street, which is where the hospital was that Stolypin had been taken to, and that the Black Hundreds were calling for a pogrom against the Jews.

'As if we haven't had enough already!' cried Grandmother, furious at the thought of it.

Gattenberger said that as long as the tsar was in Kiev there would be no pogrom.

'Are you going back into town?' Grandmother asked me the next morning.

'Yes, to school.'

'Why?'

'We're rehearsing for the tsar's visit.'

'Don't go. You can tell them you were sick,' Grandmother said. 'What nonsense! Doesn't the tsar have anything better to do than show himself off to a bunch of schoolboys?'

I said that of course she was right.

'Well, then, don't go! Everyone's rushing hither and thither in town all because of this Nicholas. They're wasting time on mere trifles, as if God will somehow make it up to them. Stay at home. Perhaps you'll have a headache? Just sit and read in the garden. I'll bake you a strutzel.' (Grandmother never could say 'strudel' properly.) 'I don't understand how people can go around wasting time like this. It makes no sense, it's pointless, especially in this weather!'

I listened to Grandmother and skipped the rehearsal.

The weather was indeed wonderful. The leaves on the apple trees had turned pink and begun to dry out. Some of them had shrivelled up into little funnels and were wrapped in cobwebs. Red and white asters were flowering along the paths. Yellow butterflies fluttered among the trees. They settled in clusters on the surfaces warmed by the sun – the stone steps of the verandah, the metal watering can left out on the lawn. As though diminished by the autumn, the sun travelled slowly overhead, taking a long time to reach the tops of the walnut trees.

I sat in the garden reading in Grandmother's wicker chair. Now and then a few notes of music reached me from the city. I put down my book and looked at the path. It had been cut through the lawn's thick grass and along its sharp edges grew a fringe of velvety dark green moss. A small patch of white stood out against the moss. For a second time a wood anemone had sprouted here from a seed which had somehow been blown into the garden. A white duck waddled in from the yard. Upon seeing me, it stopped, quacked with displeasure and left, teetering from side to side as it went. My presence had obviously upset the poor creature. Sparrows sat on the roof preening themselves and craning their necks to see whether there wasn't something interesting in the garden. Finding nothing, they waited.

Grandmother came out onto the verandah wrapped in a warm shawl and tossed a handful of breadcrumbs. The sparrows flew down and began hopping about on the ground like small grey balls.

'Kostik,' she said, 'come in for dinner.'

She was standing on the steps of the verandah. I stood up and went over to her. From the house came the smell of apple strudel.

'Now here's a true royal feast for you!' Grandmother said, looking out at the garden. 'But still folks feel the need to dream up all sorts of nonsense for this Nicholas the Second!'

She was right. The garden truly was a feast of sunlight and fresh warm air.

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Razgulyai Square

I travelled to visit Mama in Moscow over the Christmas holidays. As the train was passing Bryansk, it snowed so hard nothing was visible outside the window. I could only imagine behind the falling snow the familiar little town with its streets carpeted in shiny white powder and Uncle Kolya's house with its glass-enclosed verandah. It was my first trip to Moscow. I was excited to see Mama and to be leaving our southern, provincial Kiev for the northern capital. With every hour the train moved ever deeper into the white plains, slowly climbing to the edge of the dove-grey sky. There, in the dark haze, it seemed to me that up ahead on the horizon the day was merging with the eternal polar night.

I was afraid of the Moscow winter. I didn't have a warm coat, just mittens and a hat with long ear flaps. Bells clanged in the cold air at the stations, and felt boots crunched in the snow. The man travelling next to me offered me some cured bear meat; it smelled of pine pitch.

That night, somewhere beyond Sukhinichi, the train got stuck in heavy snowdrifts. The wind howled in the metal ventilators. Guards, white and shaggy with snow like woodsmen, ran with their lanterns up and down the train, slamming the doors behind them with all their might. With each crash of the doors I was startled awake. In the morning I went out onto the platform at the end of the corridor. The icy air cut my face. Snow, driven by the wind through the cracks around the door, lay in small, fluffy mounds. With difficulty I managed to open the carriage door. The blizzard had died down. The magnificent snow embraced the train up to the buffers. It was so deep you could drown in it. Up above on top of the carriage a small blue bird sat chirping, twisting its head this way and that. It was impossible to tell where the white sky ended and the white earth began. It was so still I could hear the water dripping from the engine.

Dima met me in Moscow at Bryansky station. A stiff black moustache bristled on his upper lip. He was wearing the uniform of the Technological Institute. I was cold so we went to the buffet to have a tea. I was struck by the station – a low wooden structure like some enormous tavern. Orange sunlight fell on the counter, on the containers with their German silver lids, the tables and blue potted palms, the steam rising from the teapots, the muslin curtains. From beyond the windows etched with arrow-shaped leaves of frost came the shouting of cabbies.

We drank our tea with sugar cubes and were served crisp pastries sprinkled with flour. Then we went out onto the steps. Steam rose from the icy horses. The metal badges on the cabbies' thick and heavily patched coats caught the sun, dazzling our eyes. Pigeons were landing on the manure-spattered snow.

'Where to, Your Excellencies?' the drivers shouted, smacking their lips and shaking the reins. One of them drove up. He threw back a worn wolfskin cover and we climbed into the narrow sleigh. We buried our feet in the straw on the floor. I looked around in amazement. Could this really be Moscow?

'Razgulyai Square,' Dima told the driver, 'but be sure to go through the Kremlin.'

'As you wish. It's all the same to me,' the driver grunted.

In an instant we found ourselves in Dorogomilovo just past the station in a tangle of sledges, their mighty wooden yokes painted with flowers and bedecked with little bells. The heavy wet breath of exhausted horses hit us in the face, policemen with frozen moustaches sauntered past, overhead hung the signs of a multitude of taverns and inns, and the peal of church bells rang in the air.

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We drove over Borodino Bridge. The windows of the houses on the far side of the river caught the fading light and burned with a dying golden glow. The round clocks on the street corners showed only two o'clock. This was all so strange, bewildering and wonderful.

'Well,' Dima asked, 'how do you like Moscow?'

'Very much.'

'Just wait, there's still plenty of marvels to feast your eyes on.'

Beyond Arbatskaya Square we turned into a narrow street. At the end of it I saw a hill, upon which sat ramparts and towers, the tops of green-roofed palaces, and grey cathedrals. Everything was veiled in the

reddish smoke of the evening's setting sun.

'What's that?' I asked Dima, confused by it all.

'You really don't recognise it? That's the Kremlin.'

I sighed, uncontrollably. I was not prepared for this encounter with the Kremlin. It rose up above this enormous city like a fortress built of pink stone, ancient gold and silence. This was the Kremlin. This was Russia, the history of my people. 'Who so proud as not to bare his head before the Kremlin's holy gates . . .'[1]

My eyes began to fill with tears. We drove into the Kremlin through the Borovitsky Gate. I saw the Tsar Bell, the Tsar Cannon and the bell tower of Ivan the Great as it disappeared into the evening sky. We three removed our hats as the sleigh passed through the gates of the Spasskaya Tower, its interior dimly lit by a flickering lamp. The clock chimed with grand indifference over our heads.

'And what's that?' I asked Dima, grabbing his arm as we exited.

On the slope above the Moscow River there rose an intricate cluster of cupolas, like brightly coloured heads of burdock.

'Don't you recognise St Basil's Cathedral?' Dima grinned.

Bonfires burned on Red Square, around which cabbies and passers-by stood warming themselves. Smoke hung over the square. On the walls I saw posters from the Moscow Art Theatre with its flying seagull and other posters with the words 'Emile Verhaeren'[2] in heavy black type.

'What's that?' I asked Dima again.

'Verhaeren is now in Moscow,' he answered and laughed, looking at me. I must have had a silly expression on my face. There were still plenty of marvels awaiting me.

It was dark by the time we got to Razgulyai Square. Our sleigh stopped in front of a two-storey house with thick walls. We climbed a steep staircase. Dima rang the bell, and Mama flung open the door. Behind her stood Galya, craning her neck to see me on the dark landing. Mama embraced me and started to cry. She'd gone completely grey since I last saw her.

'My Lord,' she said, 'you're all grown up! You look just like your father! Oh Lord, just like him!'

Galya was now almost blind. She led me to a lamp in the flat and examined me for a long time. From her strained expression I could tell she couldn't see me at all; still she kept insisting that I had not changed in the slightest. The furnishings were meagre and unfamiliar. But I did recognise a few things from my childhood – Mama's jewellery box, an antique bronze alarm clock and a photograph of my father taken as a young man. The photograph hung on the wall over Mama's bed.

Mama was upset that dinner still wasn't ready and went off to the kitchen. Galya, as usual, began to ask me silly questions – how's the weather in Kiev, why was the train delayed, does Grandmother Viktoria Ivanovna still drink coffee for breakfast? Dima was silent. I felt that our lives these past two years had been so fraught and difficult that I didn't know what to say. Then I realised there was at this point no need to bring up anything difficult or important. During these two years our lives had gone in completely different directions. There was no way I could say all I wanted to in the ten days I was to be in Moscow. And so I said nothing about my life – not to Mama, Dima or Galya. With a faint nostalgia my thoughts turned to my grandmother and my room on Lukyanovka. It seemed that my real life was back there. Everything here seemed strange – Dima's institute, the old, gloomy two-room flat, Galya's boring questions. Only Mama's eyes remained the same. But Mama now worried over trifles that she never would have given any thought to before.

I was waiting for her to ask me about my plans, but it was not until we'd sat down to dinner that she asked in a casual way: 'What will you do after you leave school?'

'Go to university,' I replied.

After dinner Mama took some grey theatre tickets with seagulls printed on them out of her jewellery box. 'These are for you,' she said.

They were tickets to *The Man Who Was Dead* and *Three Sisters* at the Art Theatre. She had queued outside the theatre all night long in the freezing cold to buy them. Overjoyed, I kissed her, and she smiled and said how much she had enjoyed standing out all night in a crowd of students. She hadn't had that much fun in a long time. *Three Sisters* was on that evening, and Dima and I left for the theatre straight after dinner. We rode in a cold tram to Teatralnaya Square. The electrical cables crackled and shot blue sparks.

Fresh snow sparkled on the square. Flakes seemed to be suspended in the night air, hovering in the light of the street lamps. The shop windows of Muir and Mirrielees cast elongated patches of light onto the pavement. In one of the windows stood a Christmas tree, all lit up and decorated with gold and silver paper chains, which hung down to the floor. We crossed Teatralnaya Square into Kamergersky Lane before entering the modest-looking theatre. The floors were covered in heavy grey cloth. People were

moving without making a sound. A hot breeze blew from the radiators. The brown curtain emblazoned with a seagull rippled slightly. Everything was at once austere yet festive.

My cheeks burned and my eyes, I guess, sparkled such that the theatre-goers around us were looking at me with smiles on their faces. Dima said: 'Pull yourself together or you won't hear or see a thing.' I ached for the characters who suffered so in Chekhov's play. Yet at the same time, I was filled with a feeling of fresh excitement, a feeling that flowed from being in the presence of the arts. All the sad and miserable things I had seen at Razgulyai now struck me as temporary and unimportant. Despite all our poverty, insults and failures, no one could extinguish the light coming from that mysterious world of the arts. No one could take this treasure from me. And no one had the key to it but myself. I spent all ten days in Moscow in this state. Mama kept looking at me and repeating that I had become just like my father.

'It's clear to me,' she finally said, 'there's little chance of you becoming a decent man.' She fell silent and then added: 'No, you'll never be of much help to us, or even to yourself. Not with your passions, with your fantasies! Not with your frivolous approach to everything!'

I was silent. Mama pulled me towards her and gave me a kiss. 'Well, so be it! I just want you to be happy. Nothing else matters.'

'But I am happy,' I said. 'Please don't worry about me. I've lived on my own for two years now. And I have no problem continuing to do so.'

Mama had started to wear glasses. The frame had broken and was held together by tape. She fiddled with the tape for a long while, then took off her glasses and looked at me carefully.

'How cold our family has become,' she sighed. 'And secretive. It's all because we're poor. You've come all this way and haven't said a word about yourself. And I don't say anything either. I just keep putting it off. But we really need to talk.'

'Well, all right, then. Only don't upset yourself.'

'Galya is blind!' Mama said. She was quiet a long time. 'And now she's losing her hearing. She wouldn't last a week without me. You have no idea the amount of care she needs. She requires all the strength I have. God alone knows how much I love you three – you, Dima and Galya – but I simply can't be there for all of you.'

I told her that I understood everything and that very soon I'd be able to help her and Galya. I just had to finish school first. I no longer had any intention, as before, of coming back to live with Mama. But I felt sorry for her, I loved her, and I didn't want her to torment herself on my behalf. I calmed her down and then, with a lightened heart, I left to visit the Tretyakov Gallery.

I felt like a guest in my own family. The contrast between Moscow, with its brilliant snow and icy winter sky, its theatres, museums and church bells, and the two cold rooms on Razgulyai, with their pinched and dreary life, was too big. It bewildered me to see Dima looking so perfectly content with his life – his institute and chosen profession that was so alien to me. It was with the same bewilderment that I noticed how Dima's room was devoid of books, except for a few textbooks and mimeographed lecture notes. As for Galya, her blindness meant her days were spent in cautious preoccupation with various insignificant tasks. She had to do everything by touch. Time for her had stopped three years ago when she started to go blind. Now she lived in her memories, which were trivial and monotonous. The range of these memories grew ever smaller – Galya had begun to forget a great deal. Sometimes she just sat in silence with her hands folded in her lap. Once in a while Mama found some time in the evening to read a bit to Galya, usually from Goncharov or Turgenev. Then Galya would question her about every last detail from the story she had just heard in the hope of remembering it all. Mama patiently answered her questions.

I left for the Tretyakov Gallery. There was hardly anyone there. It seemed to me as if the still winter had somehow transported the gallery from the city to the quiet Moscow suburbs – not a single sound from outside could be heard. Some old women – guardians of these masterpieces – sat dozing in their chairs. I stood looking for a long time at Nesterov's *The Vision of Bartholomew*[3] with its thin birch trees as white as candles and its grass reaching up to the sky with faith and hope. I was moved by the painting's touching and undemanding beauty.

On a couch sat a stout white-haired woman in black examining with a lorgnette the painting from across the room. Next to her sat a young woman with auburn plaits. I stood off to the side so as not to block her view. The white-haired woman turned and said to me: 'What do you think, Kostik, doesn't it remind you of the hills beyond the park at Rëvny?' Startled, I looked at her confusedly. She gazed at me with a smile: 'You young people are so unobservant!' she said. 'Have you really already forgotten us Karelins – Lyuba, Sasha and me? We met at Rëvny, true it was some years ago.'

I blushed and said hello. Now I recognised the white-haired lady – Maria Trofimovna Karelina. But I did not recognise Lyuba at first. She had grown up, and no longer wore the black ribbons in her plaits.

‘Have a seat,’ said Maria Trofimovna. ‘How you’ve grown! I suppose I shouldn’t be calling you Kostik anymore. Do tell us how you ended up here. And together we’ll reminisce about Rëvny. Oh, what a place, what a place! We really must go back this summer.’

I told her about myself. Maria Trofimovna informed me that she and Sasha were still living in Orël. Lyuba had finished school and enrolled at the Moscow College of Painting and Sculpture. Maria Trofimovna and Sasha had come to visit her in Moscow over the Christmas holidays.

‘And where is Sasha?’ I asked.

‘She stayed back at the hotel. She has a sore throat.’

Lyuba kept sneaking glances at me the whole time. We left together. I walked the Karelins back to the Loskutnaya Hotel. They insisted I come up to warm myself and have a cup of coffee. The large two-room suite was dark with heavy curtains and carpets. Sasha greeted me like an old friend and immediately began to ask about Gleb Afanasiev. As far as I knew Gleb was still at school in Bryansk. Sasha had a ribbon tied around her neck like a kitten. She took me by the hand: ‘Come! I’m going to show you Lyuba’s pictures.’ She began to pull me into the other room, but Lyuba grabbed my other hand and pulled me back.

‘Nonsense!’ she said, blushing. ‘You’ll look at them later. We’ll see you again, won’t we?’

‘I don’t know,’ I hesitated.

‘He’s going to spend New Year’s Eve with us!’ Sasha cried. ‘At Lyuba’s studio on Kislovka. You wouldn’t believe the bohemians who gather there. You have no idea, Kostik! Knights of the canvas and palette. There’s one painter – she’s straight out of a French novel. You’re bound to fall in love with her at first sight. She goes about in a black satin dress – frou-frou-frou! – and her perfume, oh her perfume! It’s called Sorrow of the Tuberose!’

‘Oh Lord, what rubbish you talk,’ said Lyuba. ‘Now I understand why your throat hurts all the time.’

‘I have the delicate throat of a nightingale,’ said Sasha, making a sad face. ‘It’s not suited to these harsh Russian winters.’

‘But seriously, won’t you join us for New Year?’ Lyuba asked.

‘I’ll be at home. It’s a family tradition.’

‘Fine, greet the New Year at home and then come to Lyuba’s,’ Maria Trofimovna said firmly. ‘They’ll be up having fun and being silly all night long.’

I agreed to come. Then we had our coffee. Sasha dropped four lumps of sugar into my cup. It was undrinkable. Maria Trofimovna scolded her. Lyuba sat quietly, staring at the floor.

‘Why are you sitting there like Vasilisa the Beautiful?’ asked Sasha. ‘She’s become quite the beauty, hasn’t she, Kostik? Look at her. Not like her little sister, the Ugly Duckling.’

‘Stop it once and for all, you chatterbox!’ Lyuba pushed away her cup and jumped up from the table. I looked at Lyuba. Blue sparks flashed in her eyes. She truly was quite beautiful.

I left. At home I told Mama that I’d seen the Karelins and they’d invited me to spend New Year’s Eve with them. Mama was happy. ‘You must go. I fear you’ve been bored here in Moscow. They’re nice people and very cultured.’

Culture was Mama’s yardstick for judging people. If she respected someone she would always say: ‘Now there’s a truly cultured person!’

New Year’s Eve was still two days away. These were marvellous days – white hoar-frost covered everything and a silver mist hung in the air. I went skating at the rink in the Zoological Garden. The ice there was thick and black, not like back in Kiev. The attendants swept it with enormous brooms. I raced a bearded man in a black sheepskin hat around the rink and won. He reminded me of the artist I had seen at the estate near Smela where I’d once been with Aunt Nadya. Mama kept saying she was going to take me to Aunt Nadya’s grave at Vagankovo cemetery but she never did. She told me that her grave was still decorated with porcelain roses. They had faded but hadn’t broken.

I went to see *The Man Who Was Dead* at the Moscow Art Theatre and I liked it better than *Three Sisters*. Up on stage was the real Moscow, with its courtroom and trial, its Gypsies and their songs. In the December snow of Moscow I recalled times past for some unknown reason – Alushta, Lena, and how she had called to me: ‘Go on! It’s just a load of nonsense!’ All these years I had kept meaning to write to her, but I never did. Now I was certain she had forgotten me.

I recalled Lena and was struck by the thought of how many people had gone from my life never to return. Not just Lena, but Aunt Nadya, my beekeeping grandfather, my father, Uncle Yuzia and so many others. It seemed so strange and sad, and although I was only eighteen, I felt as if I had already experienced a great deal. I had loved those people. Every one of them had taken a little piece of my love with them when they left. I couldn’t help but think that this had made me just a bit poorer. That’s what I thought at the time, but these thoughts didn’t rob me of my love of life, which grew stronger with each

passing year. Since many people had gone out of my life forever or for a long time, I felt that meeting the Karelins – and I had completely forgotten about them – held some special meaning.

I greeted the New Year at home. Mama baked biscuits and Dima bought hors d'oeuvres, cakes and wine. At eleven o'clock Dima left. Mama told me he'd gone to fetch his fiancée, Margarita. Mama assured me she was a remarkable girl and she could not wish for a better wife for Dima. Not wanting to hurt Mama's feelings, I feigned pleasant surprise even though I didn't like her name or the fact that she came from a family of state officials. I helped Mama set the table. The room smelled of scorched hair. Galya had burned off a long curl doing her hair with a hot iron. She was very upset and I did all I could to cheer her up. We lit the candles. Mama put the bronze alarm clock on the table, and I set it for twelve o'clock.

I got out the presents I had brought from Kiev – for Mama, grey cloth to make a new dress, for Galya, a pair of slippers, for Dima, a large box of drawing instruments. The box was exquisite and had belonged to Borya, but I had convinced him to give it up. Mama was so pleased at the presents she even blushed.

A few minutes before midnight Dima returned with a tall, pale girl. She had a long, sad face and wore an ill-fitting lilac dress with a yellow sash. A lace kerchief was pinned to her bodice. She blushed the entire time and kept helping herself to pieces of cake from the serving plate with her fork. Galya immediately began asking her questions about her thoughts on proper child rearing. The girl responded reluctantly, looking over at Dima, who sat there with an uncomfortable smile on his face.

The bronze clock suddenly rang, putting an end to Galya's talk. We raised our glasses of wine and wished each other Happy New Year. It was obvious Mama really wanted Margarita to like us. At the same time, she watched closely how Margarita looked at Dima, as if she were trying to gauge whether there was enough love in the girl's glances. I talked about this and that and did my best to show everyone how much fun I was having, all the while stealing glances at the clock.

Mama drank her wine and began to relax. She told Margarita about Easters with our grandmother back in Cherkassy and about how fine and happy our lives in Kiev had once been. It was as if she couldn't even believe it herself. 'Isn't that right, Kostik? Wasn't that how it was?' I kept telling her that she was right. That's just how it had been. At half past one I excused myself and got up to leave. Mama showed me out. She asked me conspiratorially what I thought of Margarita. I knew telling her the truth would only cause her undue pain. So I said Margarita was a charming girl and I was very happy for Dima.

'Well, let's hope it all works out!' she whispered. 'It seems to me that Margarita likes Galya too.'

I went out into Basmannaya Street, stopped and took a deep breath of the cold air. Lights burned in the windows of the houses up and down the street. I waved down a cabbie and drove off towards Kislovka. The entire way the man swore at his horse.

Sasha opened the door at Kislovka. She was wearing a bright new ribbon around her neck. Some little girls followed by a handsome old man in a student's uniform came running into the front hall. There was no sign of Lyuba. Laughing, the little girls removed my hat and coat and the old man began to sing in a clear voice: 'Three young goddesses began to quarrel, upon a hill as evening fell.'

'His eyes! His eyes!' the girls shouted.

Sasha covered my eyes with her hands. The smell of her hair, her perfume and the touch of her fingers gently pressing against my eyes combined to take my breath away. I was taken by the hands and led away. I sensed some doors opening in front of me and then felt a rush of warm air hit me in the face. The room fell quiet and then a woman's voice issued a stern order: 'Swear!'

'Swear what?' I asked.

'That tonight you shall forget everything but gaiety.'

Sasha's fingers began to hurt my eyes.

'I swear!'

'And now swear the oath of allegiance!'

'To whom?'

'To her who has been chosen queen of our fête.'

'Swear,' Sasha whispered, tickling my ear with her breath.

'I swear.'

'As a sign of obedience, kiss the Queen's hand, such is the tradition of all knights,' said the voice, suppressing a laugh. 'Sasha, now take your big paws off him!'

Sasha removed her hands. I beheld a brightly lit room crowded with paintings. A skinny man in a velvet jacket was lying in the pose of Vrubel's *Demon Downcast* on top of a piano. His arms were twisted over his head, and he gazed at me with doleful eyes. A pug-nosed youth pounded out a chord on the keyboard. The girls all took a step back, and there before me was Lyuba. She was sitting in an armchair on a round table. She wore a flowing dress of white silk that pooled at her feet. Her bare arms hung

down at her side, and in her right hand she held a fan of black ostrich feathers. Lyuba looked at me, trying not to laugh. I approached and kissed her outstretched hand. The old man dressed as a student gave me a glass of champagne. It was ice cold. I drank it down in one gulp.

Lyuba rose to her feet. I helped her down off the table. She took the edge of her long dress in one hand, bowed to me and asked: 'We didn't frighten you with our nonsense, did we? Why did he give you cold champagne? You need something warm. I think we still have some mulled wine.'

I was dragged to a table and was just being served when they forgot all about this and, with a laugh, pushed the table, and me with it, into the corner to make room for dancing. The young man at the piano struck up a waltz. The Demon jumped off the piano and began to dance with Lyuba. Leaning back in his arms and covering her face with the black fan, she flew about the room. Every time she passed by me, she smiled from under her fan, one hand holding the train of her dress. The old man was dancing with the woman Sasha called the heroine of a French novel. She was letting out a sinister laugh. Sasha pulled me up from the table and we began to dance. She was so thin I feared she might break in two.

'Just don't dance with Lyuba,' she said.

'Why?'

'She's stuck up!'

Once we had finished dancing, the Demon downed all the remaining wine in the bottles and was soon drunk. 'I thirst for summer!' he screamed. 'Enough of the icicles! Give me rain!'

No one was paying him any attention, and he disappeared. The old man sat down at the piano and began to sing in a heart-breaking voice: 'My distant friend, do you know why I weep . . .'[4]

As soon as he had finished, we suddenly heard the sound of rain, a heavy and fresh downpour, from somewhere nearby. Startled, we fell silent, and then raced out into the hall and straight to the bathroom. The Demon was standing in the bathtub in his raincoat and galoshes, a black umbrella in his hand, while a powerful stream of water rained down on him from the shower. 'Gold! It's raining gold straight from heaven!' he yelled.

We turned off the shower and pulled the Demon out of the bath. The night's commotion dragged on, and I too found myself laughing, reciting poetry and blathering. I finally came to my senses when Lyuba extinguished the chandelier and the bluish haze of dawn crept into the room. We all fell silent. As the blue morning light mixed with the fire of the table lamp, faces became smudgy and beautiful.

'This is the best time after all-night parties,' said the old man. 'Now we can leisurely sip our wine and talk about this and that. I love the dawn. It rinses the soul.'

The Demon hadn't sobered up yet. 'No rinsing!' he shouted. 'I don't care to hear anyone, no matter who, rinsing his soul. A lot of Dostoevskian nonsense. Light consists of seven colours. I bow down before them. And I don't give a damn about anything else!'

We were all quiet for a long time, caught in a dreamy drowsiness. Lyuba was sitting next to me. 'Everything's swimming in front of my eyes,' she said. 'And it's all bathed in blue . . . And I have no intention of going to sleep.'

'Catharsis!' the old man pronounced with great importance. 'The cleansing of the soul from tragedy.'

'I don't know about that,' Lyuba replied. Her mind wandered. The blue of the morning reflected in her eyes.

'You're tired,' I said.

'No. It's just that I feel so wonderful.'

'Is it true you'll be in Rëvny this summer?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Are you coming?'

'Yes, if Uncle Kolya will be there.'

'Only "if"?' Lyuba asked slyly.

Everyone began to get up and say their goodbyes. I was the last to leave. I had to see Sasha back to the Loskutnaya Hotel, but she was waiting for her throat to cool after a scalding cup of tea. Out in the street fashionable women and young men – we assumed they must be actors – were having a snowball fight. The snow was sprinkled with brightly coloured confetti. The sun was up by now, dissolving the night fog with its blurry fire.

After this exotic night I was ashamed to return to our wretched flat on Razgulyai Square and its stench of paraffin. But the thought lasted only a moment, and then my soul lifted again, as if all of life – the snow, the sunlight and Lyuba's hand, which had grasped mine for an instant upon parting – had been imperceptibly transformed into a gentle piece of music.

Two days later I left Moscow. Mama, hunched and wearing a warm shawl, saw me to the station. Dima went with Margarita that evening to the theatre. Galya kept worrying that I'd miss my train. On the platform, Mama said: 'Don't be angry. I misspoke when I said you're like your father. I know you're a

good boy.’

The train departed the station. It was evening. I stood by the window for a long time looking out on the lights of Moscow. Perhaps, I thought, one of them was the light from Lyuba’s room.

[1] From ‘Moscow’ (1840) by Fëdor Glinka (1786–1880).

[2] Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), Belgian Symbolist poet.

[3] Painting from 1890 by Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942) depicting a scene from the life of Sergei Radonezhsky (born Bartholomew), also Sergius of Radonezh, the great fourteenth-century holy man.

[4] The opening line of Afanasy Fet’s verse epistle ‘A. L. Brzhevskaya’ (1879).

36

A Tale about Nothing

The thaw started in February. A thick fog kept settling over Kiev, only to be chased away by a warm wind. Lukyanovka smelled of melting snow. And of wood bark. It blew in on the wind from beyond the Dnieper, near Chernigov, where the forests were darkening with the approach of spring.

Water dripped from the roof and the melting icicles, and only at night, and even then not often, did the wind tear away the clouds, so that the puddles froze and the stars came out. You could see them only in the outskirts of the city where we lived. In town there was too much light from the houses and street lamps for anyone to even suspect their presence. Grandmother's cottage was warm and cosy on the raw February nights. The electric lights glowed inside behind the closed shutters, while the wind blustered in the empty garden.

I had begun writing a new story – about Polesia and the Old Men of Mogilëv. I couldn't stop tinkering with it, and the more I tinkered, the more I drained the life out of the story. It ended up limp and stale. Nevertheless, I finally finished the story and took it over to the editors of *Lights*. Their office was on Fundukleevskaya Street in a small room facing the yard. A cheery-looking and rather tubby little man was preparing his tea and slicing sausage on a pile of galleys. He wasn't surprised in the least by the appearance of a schoolboy with a manuscript. He took the story, quickly glanced at the ending, and said that he liked it but that I'd have to wait for the editor. 'Did you use your real surname?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Bad idea. We're a left-wing magazine. And you're just a schoolboy. There could be trouble. Think up a pseudonym.'

I obediently crossed out my name on the last page and wrote down 'Balagin' instead.

'That'll do!' he said approvingly.

A thin man with a sallow complexion, a tangled beard and sunken piercing eyes walked into the room. He had trouble taking off his large snow boots, and then began cursing and coughing as he unwound his long scarf.

'Here's the editor,' said the tubby fellow, who stopped peeling the sausage and pointed at the newcomer with his penknife.

Without bothering to even glance in my direction, the editor went over to his desk, sat down, stretched out a long arm and then said in a flat and terrifying voice: 'Give it here!'

I placed the manuscript in his outstretched hand.

'Are you aware that rejected manuscripts are not returned?' the editor asked.

'Yes.'

'Magnificent!' he grumbled. 'Come back in an hour. I'll have an answer for you.'

The tubby man winked and gave me a smile. I left discouraged and wandered up and down Kreshchatik for a long while before going to the library, where I ran into Fitsovsky. He had just picked up a volume of Ibsen and began to berate me for not reading more of him. He insisted that Ibsen's *Ghosts* was the greatest work of literature in the world. We left the library together. It was still too early to return to the editorial office. We ducked into a dark courtyard to smoke. We were forbidden to smoke and didn't want to be seen out on the street by a teacher or any of the school officials.

Fitsovsky walked with me to the office and said he would wait outside. He wanted to find out the editor's decision, but I asked him to leave. I was terrified and didn't want Fitsovsky to see me if they rejected my story. I went in. The editor just looked at me closely for a while without saying a word. I didn't say a word either. I could feel my face becoming warm and damp. I was aware that I was blushing terribly.

'May I have my manuscript back?' I asked.

'Your manuscript?' the editor said and began choking with laughter. 'Yes, of course, please, here you are. You can have it back and then toss it in the fire. It's just that I want to publish your story. Can you imagine, I actually liked it.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't realise,' I mumbled.

'Such a hot-tempered young man! Since you're going to be a writer, please show a little patience.

Come and pick up your honorarium on Wednesday,' he said icily, before changing his tone: 'And do me the favour of bringing in whatever you write next.'

I dashed out of the office. Fitsovsky was standing by the front gate. He hadn't left as I had told him to.

'Well?' he asked nervously. 'Did they accept it?'

'Yes, they did.'

'Let's go to my place!' he said. 'I've got a bottle of muscatel and some pickled apples. We must celebrate!'

We drank the bottle of muscatel, and I didn't get home until very late, after the trams had stopped running. I walked along the empty streets. All the lights were out. Had I encountered a beggar I would have given him the coat off my back or done something else just as rash. But the only thing I met was a white dog. It was cold and wet, sitting by a fence. I dug around in my pockets but didn't find anything to give it. I patted it and then walked off. The dog got up and followed me. I talked to the dog all the way home. It kept jumping up and nipping at my coat sleeve, as if to show me it understood.

'Listen,' I said and stopped. The dog's ears went up. There was a rustling sound coming from the gardens along the street, as if last year's leaves were being stirred. 'Do you know what that means?' I asked. 'That's the sound of spring. And after that it'll soon be summer. That's when I'll be leaving. And maybe then I'll meet a woman, perhaps the finest woman in the world.'

The dog jumped and snapped at my sleeve, and we walked on.

Every window was dark. The city slept. How could it? I thought to myself. No one should be sleeping on such a splendid night. Everyone ought to be up and outside to witness the dark passage of these clouds and to listen to the soft gurgle of the melting snow and the muffled dripping of water within the hollowed snowdrifts.

I don't know how I got home. Grandmother was asleep. The dog followed me quietly into my room. Supper, long gone cold, was waiting for me on the table. I fed the dog a bit of bread and meat and made it a bed in the corner by the stove. It lay down and fell fast asleep. Now and then it wagged its tail without waking, as if in gratitude. Grandmother wasn't angry when she saw the dog in the morning. She felt sorry for it, called it Cadeau, started feeding it, and in the end the dog stayed with her for good.

Spring grew closer with each day. Along with it came our final examinations. To pass we had to revise everything we had ever learned in school. This was difficult, especially in springtime.

Uncle Kolya arrived from Bryansk at the end of the Easter holidays to visit Grandmother for a few days. He stayed with me in my room. Aunt Vera was offended he didn't live with her family in the big house, but he brushed the matter off with a joke. Lying in our beds in the evening, Uncle Kolya and I talked and laughed. When she overheard us, Grandmother got up out of bed, dressed and came and sat with us until late in the night.

One evening Uncle Kolya and I attended another of Aunt Vera's stuffy command supper parties. She gathered around her what Grandmother called a collection of '*monstres et créatures*'. I felt a particular dislike for the noted Kievan oculist Dumitrashko, a small man with a squeaky voice, a wavy beard and flowing locks of golden hair that pooled over the collar of his black frock coat. As soon as he arrived, poison began to fill the air. Rubbing his puffy hands, Dumitrashko would immediately begin spouting all sorts of nasty filth about the intelligentsia. Aunt Vera's husband, a businessman with a dark complexion and a face covered in blackheads, always egged him on. And then there was Piotukh, a retired general whose arrival no one ever seemed to notice. He came with his three daughters, all of them old maids, and talked almost exclusively about the price of firewood, which he bought and sold on the side.

Aunt Vera tried to be a witty hostess but had little success. She began nearly every sentence with her beloved words 'Do keep in mind'. 'Do keep in mind,' she would say, 'Madame Bashinskaya wears only lilac dresses' or 'Do keep in mind, the apples in this pie come from my own garden.' Her attempts to start a conversation never went anywhere.

She forced her daughter Nadya to play the piano and sing as the evening's entertainment. Terrified by the intense stares the general's daughters gave her, Nadya would pick away hesitantly at the piano as she tried to sing in her weak, shaky voice the once fashionable romance 'The Swan': 'The creek sleeps, silent is the glassy water . . .' Her German music teacher sat quietly, her eyes anxiously watching Nadya. The woman had a large and unusually thin nose such that when she sat next to a bright lamp, the light shone through it. Above this nose rose a tall pile of hair on her head held in place by a garland of flowers.

After supper Uncle Kolya and I returned to the cottage. 'Ugh!' he said with a deep exhale. 'That was just awful!' In order to forget what we had just sat through and to try to cheer ourselves up, Uncle Kolya invited Gattenberger over to Grandmother's room for a small concert. He sang Polish folk songs for her accompanied by Gattenberger on the cello:

O Vistula, so blue,
Like some wondrous flower.
To foreign lands you flow, such is your power,
Your path so long and so true!

Grandmother listened, her hands folded in her lap. Her head shook ever so slightly, and tears clouded her eyes. Poland was far, far away. Grandmother knew she would never again see the Niemen or the Vistula or Warsaw. Walking had become difficult for her, and she had even stopped going to church.

The day he left Uncle Kolya told me that he planned to return to Rëvny next summer and made me promise to come and join him. I was only too happy to say yes.

Once I knew I would be going back to Rëvny, everything looked different. I even began to believe that I would have no trouble passing my final examinations. The promise of happier days was a long way off, however, and so there was nothing I could do but wait. But then, sometimes it's the mere anticipation of happy days – and not the days themselves – that is the most enjoyable part. At the time I knew nothing about this strange quality of life, but I would become convinced of it later.

37

Leaving School

Final examinations began at the end of May and lasted for an entire month. The rest of the school had already been let out for the summer holidays. Our form alone turned up every morning to the cool, empty gymnasium, which seemed to be resting after the commotion of the winter months. Our footsteps echoed from floor to floor. The windows in the Assembly Hall, where the examinations were held, had been opened. Dandelion seeds floated around the room in the sunlight like little blinking white lights.

We were required to take the examinations in our dress uniforms. The stiff silver-braided collars scratched our necks. We sat in the garden under the chestnut trees, our collars unbuttoned, waiting our turn. The examinations frightened us, and we were sad to be leaving school. We had grown used to it. The future looked unclear and troubling, mainly because we would inevitably lose touch with each other. Our loyal, happy family was being destroyed. We called a meeting in the garden before the first examination. Every pupil was invited, except for the Jews. They were not even supposed to know about the meeting. We agreed that the best Russian and Polish pupils should make certain to get a mark of four or lower in at least one subject so none of us would win a gold medal. We had decided that all the gold medals should go to the Jews because without them they would not be admitted to university. We swore to keep this a secret. To our credit, we never spoke of it, neither then, nor later once at university. I am breaking this vow only because almost none of my schoolmates are still alive. Most of them perished in the great wars that my generation had to face. Only a handful of us have survived.

There was a second meeting. This was to decide which among us ought to help some of the girls from the Mariinskaya Girls' Gymnasium write their compositions. I don't know why, but they took the written Russian literature examination together with us. Stanishevsky was in charge of the negotiations with the girls. He brought back a list of the girls needing help. There were six names on it.

I was told to help a girl named Bogushevich. I had never seen or even heard of her. We wrote our compositions in the Assembly Hall. Everyone sat at their own separate desk – boys to the left, girls to the right. Monitors patrolled the wide aisle between us to see that we didn't pass back and forth any notes, cribs or other suspicious objects. Each of the six girls needing our help took a seat along the aisle. I tried to guess which one was Bogushevich. Her name suggested a plump Ukrainian. One of the girls was indeed plump, with heavy plaits. I decided this had to be her.

The director walked in. We rose. With a loud rip, he tore open a heavy sealed envelope and removed a sheet of paper with the composition theme sent from the District Department of Education. Next, he took a piece of chalk and carefully began to write on the blackboard: 'True education combines moral and intellectual development.' A groan of horror swept over the hall – this was a deadly theme. I had no time to waste. I immediately set to drafting a synopsis for Bogushevich on a narrow strip of paper.

We were permitted to smoke during final examinations, but only one pupil at a time could go to the smoking room at the end of the corridor. The monitor there was the decrepit old Proctor Kazimir, the same one who had taken me to my preparatory form on the very first day. On the way down the corridor, I rolled the scrap of paper into a tube and stuck it into the hollow mouthpiece of my cigarette. After smoking the cigarette, I left the stub in a pre-arranged place on the windowsill. Kazimir didn't notice a thing. He just sat there, chewing on his sandwich.

My job was done. Next up was Littauer. He smoked his cigarette, left the stub on the sill, removed my crib, and then dropped it on Bogushevich's desk as he walked down the aisle. After him went Stanishevsky, Régamé and two others. Their job was harder than mine, requiring both sharp eyes and quick hands.

I had already started writing my composition when Littauer returned to the hall. I kept an eye on him. I wanted to see who he gave the crib to, and how, but he did it so fast I didn't even notice. Only after I saw one of the girls begin feverishly writing did I know the operation had been a success and Bogushevich had been saved. It wasn't the girl with the plaits, but a different one. All I could see was her thin back, covered with a white-striped pinafore, and the reddish curls around her neck.

We had four hours to write our composition. Most of us finished early. Only the girls were still sitting there agonising over their desks. We went out into the garden. The trees were full of birds, all of them

singing; it seemed as if they had come from every part of Kiev. A fight almost broke out between Littauer and Stanishevsky. Littauer said that Stanishevsky had done a poor job planning the operation. Stanishevsky was livid. Basking in its success, he had expected our praise, not criticism.

'What was wrong with it?' he asked Littauer in a bullying tone that promised nothing good.

'Namely, that there was no damned reason to know the girls' names. Six girls, six cribs. It didn't matter who got which one. Why did I need to know whether I'm writing for Bogushevich or Yavorskaya? It's all the same to me! It only complicated matters when it came time to slip them the cribs.'

'Oh my God!' Stanishevsky shook his head in disbelief. 'You're a true cretin! You have no imagination whatsoever. I did that intentionally.'

'Why?'

'I thought that would make it more *in-ter-es-ting*!' he said with great authority. 'Perhaps this might ignite the flames of love between the saved and the saviour! Did you ever think of that?'

'No.'

'Well, you're an idiot,' Stanishevsky shot back. 'And now let's go to François's for some ice cream.'

After every examination we squandered what little money we had by stuffing ourselves full of ice cream – four servings or more – at François's café. For me, trigonometry was the most difficult examination. Somehow, I passed. The examination dragged on until the evening. We waited after the examination for the inspector to announce our marks, and, overjoyed that none of us had failed, we charged loudly out into the street.

Stanishevsky f lung his bashed-up textbook high into the air as hard as he could. The pages sprang from the destroyed book, fluttering over our heads before drifting back down and covering the street. The rest of us found this marvellous, and so we each took turns to launch our textbooks skyward. Soon the street was white with paper. From behind, we heard a policeman's whistle. We took off running into Fundukleevskaya Street, before ducking into narrow Nesterovskaya Street. Boys began breaking off to go their separate ways and after a while only five of us were left: Stanishevsky, Fitsovsky, Shmukler, Khorozhevsky and myself.

We headed for the Galitsky Market, where there were a lot of little cafés and taverns. We had decided to get drunk. The only examination left was Latin, and no one was afraid of that. We walked along joking and laughing. As the old saying goes, we were possessed by the devil. Passers-by stopped to stare. We went into a tavern at the market. The floors stank of stale beer. There were cubicles along the walls decorated with pink wallpaper that they called 'private rooms'. We took one of these 'rooms' and ordered vodka and beef Stroganoff. The proprietor carefully closed the faded curtain of our cubicle, but we were making so much noise that every so often someone would come by and peep in. We treated every one of them to some vodka, and they were happy to drink with us and offer their congratulations on our finishing school.

Late that evening the proprietor came over, pulled back the curtain and, motioning with his eyes towards the door, said in a low voice: 'There's a snooper outside.'

'What sort of snooper?' Stanishevsky asked.

'A policeman, from the Criminal Investigation Division. You need to get out of here now. Go out through the back door. You'll find a passageway in the courtyard leading to Bulvarno-Kudryavskaya Street.'

We didn't take the proprietor seriously, but still we left through the back door into a dark, smelly courtyard. Ducking our heads under the clothes lines, we filed past dustbins and woodsheds and reached Bulvarno-Kudryavskaya Street. No one had followed us. We ducked through a passageway into the dimly lit street. A round-shouldered man in a bowler hat was waiting for us.

'Good evening!' he wheezed menacingly, doffing his hat. 'Have you boys had a nice little time?'

We said nothing and walked off down Bulvarno-Kudryavskaya Street. The man in the hat followed us. 'Still wet behind the ears, but just look at you, already versed in making your getaway through back yards,' he said, with malice.

Stanishevsky stopped. The man in the hat did too. Then he put a hand in the pocket of his long jacket.

'What do you want?' Stanishevsky asked. 'Just bloody well leave us alone!'

'Frequenting taverns,' he said. 'Pupils of the Imperial Gymnasium frequenting taverns! Don't you know the punishment is expulsion with a wolf's ticket?'

'Let's go,' said Stanishevsky. 'I'm not going to listen to this fool.'

We walked on. The man in the hat followed. 'I'm not the fool. You're the fools. I once attended the gymnasium too.'

'That's obvious,' Shmukler said.

'Why is it obvious?' the man yelled hysterically. 'I was kicked out of the gymnasium with a wolf's

ticket for drinking. And you think I'm going to let you get away with it? No! I'll see you expelled with wolf's tickets if it's the last thing I do. Your exams won't do you any good now – you can say goodbye to any hope of seeing the university. Were you speaking out against the government in the tavern? Yes! Were you making jokes about the imperial family? Yes! I can handle you all. And don't try any tricks. No matter what, I'm reporting you to the Okhranka.'

We turned into a tangle of narrow streets leading to the Svyatoslavsky ravine. We thought the agent would be too afraid to follow us into this desolate, forgotten part of the city, but he stuck to our heels.

'Couldn't the five of us take him?' Stanishevsky asked.

We stopped. The agent pulled a revolver out of his pocket and showed it to us with a laugh. We led him through the streets for a long time, being certain to avoid the large intersections patrolled by the police. Fitsovsky suggested that we disappear one by one. The agent would be sure to stick with the group, until only one was left. One of us would be caught, but at least not all five. We all thought this was a bad idea. We would stick together like true comrades. We mocked the agent. Each of us loudly recited a made-up biography for him, full of increasingly monstrous and insulting details. He was huffing with rage and was getting tired, but still he clung to us with the obstinacy of a madman.

It began to grow light in the east. It was time to act. We made a plan and then circled through several small alleys before coming to Stanishevsky's house. A high stone wall, with a ledge running along its base, faced the street. On the count of three, we ran straight at the wall, jumped on the ledge, and then launched ourselves up and over. Our school gymnastics lessons had come in handy. A pile of bricks lay at our feet. Soon they were raining down on the agent on the other side of the wall. He let out a scream, retreated to the middle of the street, and fired his revolver. The bullet flew harmlessly over our heads.

We tore through the forecourt into an inner yard and then bounded up the stairs to the Stanishevskys' flat on the third floor. Within minutes we had undressed and were stretched out on the chairs and sofas listening for sounds from the street. Stanishevsky's father, a silver-haired lawyer with bristly whiskers, was pacing from room to room in his dressing gown. He shared our fighting mood, but implored us to calm down, stay where we were and keep away from the windows. At first we could hear someone frantically yanking the gate and cursing the porter. Then we heard the voices of the agent and several policemen down in the yard. We were lucky that the yard belonging to the Stanishevskys' house had a back entrance, and the porter was telling them that the boys must have run straight through and out into the next street. Making a good deal of noise, the agent and the police eventually left. We slept the sleep of the dead until noon the next day. To be certain the coast was clear, we sent our own agents – Stanishevsky's sisters – out into the street. They reported seeing nothing suspicious, and we all went home. Strange as it now seems, we had in fact narrowly escaped a serious danger: unavoidable expulsion and a wolf's ticket just two days before graduation, a fate equal to civic death.

Finally, the marvellous day arrived when the director, standing behind a green baize table in the Assembly Hall, handed out our diplomas and congratulated each of us on graduating. The gymnasium was all lit up, little coloured lanterns hung from the trees in the garden, an orchestra played.

Before the dancing began, Suboch gave a speech:

> As fourth formers I could barely tolerate you. In the fifth form, I began to educate you, although the odds of moulding you into true men were slim. In the sixth, I made friends with you. In the seventh, I became truly attached to you, and in the eighth, you even made me proud of you. I am an unhappy father. I have too many children, no fewer than forty. Moreover, every few years my children leave me and new ones arrive. So, you might say I have forty times more disappointments than most parents. And forty times as much bother. This is perhaps why I have not been able to pay you all the same amount of attention. It makes me sad to part with you. I have tried to mould you into good people. You, for your part, have given my life meaning. You kept me young. I hereby forgive you, now and forever, all of your ridiculous idiocies, even your fights with Section One. Everything is forgiven. I am not being generous, but I challenge you to become generous yourselves. Heine said that there are more fools on this earth than there are people. He was exaggerating, of course. But what did he mean by this? He meant that every day we meet people whose existence brings neither them nor those around them any joy or benefit. You ought to fear being useless. Whatever you may end up becoming in this life, remember the wise old counsel: 'Don't let a day go by without writing at least one line.' Work hard! For what is talent other than work, work, work? Learn to love work, and may you always be sorry to put it down. May your journey ahead be a happy one! And don't think unkindly of your teachers, who have gone grey in their battles with you.

We threw ourselves at him, and he kissed each and every one of us.

'And now,' said Suboch, 'a few words in Latin!' He waved his arms and broke into song: *Gaudeamus*

igitur juvenes dum sumus! Let us rejoice, therefore, while we are young!

We joined in the chorus of our first school song. Then the ball opened. Stanishevsky was the master of ceremonies. He directed the saviour-boys to invite the saved-girls onto the floor for a waltz. It was then I became acquainted with the thin girl with joyful eyes – Olga Bogushevich. She wore a white dress. Lowering her eyes and pale with embarrassment, she thanked me for my help. I told her it was nothing. We danced. Then I brought her some ice cream from the buffet. We escorted the girls home after the ball. Olga Bogushevich lived in the Lipki neighbourhood. I walked with her through the dark night under the leafy green canopy of the trees. By the time we parted, we had become friends.

From there I went to Fitsovsky's, where our circle was spending the rest of the night. We had pooled our funds for a supper with wine and invited Suboch, Selikhanovich and Johanson. Johanson sang songs by Schubert, brilliantly accompanied by Suboch on some empty bottles. We made a lot of noise and went home after the sun had come up, but before the streets had lost their long, cold shadows. Upon parting, we gave each other warm hugs, and then each of us went his separate way filled with a strange feeling of happiness and grief.

38

Summer Lightning

And there they were, just as I remembered them – the same leaves of the hazel trees just outside my window, glinting from the raindrops. And there was the same sun shining on the drenched park, the same sound of water rushing over the dam. The same Rëvny, but this time no Lyuba.

The Karelins' dacha stood empty and boarded up. A black dog had made itself a home on the verandah. Whenever someone came near, the stray jumped up and ran off to hide in the bushes, its tail between its legs. It lay there a long time, until the danger had passed. Sasha had come down with diphtheria and so the Karelins would not be arriving until the end of the summer, if at all. No one knew for certain.

The weather had been irregular that summer, with many violent thunderstorms. Uncle Kolya said it was due to more sunspots than normal. The incessant rains were followed by a drought. Calm days were suddenly ruined by a hot wind which brought a dry haze. The water in the river darkened. The tops of the pines shook and rattled and made an unsettling sound. Dust hovered over the roadways, harrowing travellers and whirling in thick clouds off to the horizon.

'It's a hard, dry summer,' the peasants all said.

The leaves shrivelled on the lime trees. The river began to dry up. The morning dew thinned out, and in the heat of the day you could hear the dried seeds popping in the grass. The hot fields were littered with the white tufts of burdock.

'There'll be quite a storm after such heat,' everyone said.

Finally, a storm did come. It arrived slowly, and Gleb Afanasiev and I watched it make its way all through the morning. The stifling heat in the bathing hut by the river was enough to give you a headache. We lay in the warm river water for a long time, neither of us wanting to get out.

It was as if smoke filled the sky, and beyond the smoke you could make out enormous black tufts of what looked like petrified cotton wool. These were the thunderheads showing through the dust. Everything was deathly quiet. The birds and frogs had fallen silent, the fish had stopped jumping. Even the leaves, fearful of the storm, had stopped rustling. Mordan had crawled off under the dacha and lay there whining softly and refusing to come out. The only sound came from people still walking about and calling to each other, although you could tell they too felt something was wrong.

The smoky haze dissipated towards dusk, and a single storm cloud, as black as night, filled half the sky. It vibrated with lightning, but there was no sound of thunder. A smudgy moon rose in the east and advanced towards the cloud all on its own, deserted by everyone, not a single star at its back. It turned pale with each flash of lightning. And then, finally, the earth drew a deep, refreshing sigh. The first crash of thunder rolled through the woods and away to the south over the fields of grain rippling in the wind. As its last rumble slowly died away, a second crash exploded and took off in the same direction to the south, shaking the ground as it went.

'That's the Prophet Elijah up in heaven,' said Gleb. 'He's out for a drive.'

Yellow vortices could now be seen scurrying about inside the cloud, whose edges had begun bending down towards the ground. Lightning flashed and danced through the dark caves of the sky. The village church bell began to ring – two quick strikes followed by a pause, repeated over and over. This was the signal to extinguish all fires. We dampened the stoves, closed the windows, doors and shutters, and then sat down on the verandah to wait.

On the far side of the park there arose a terrifying roar, as vast as the earth itself. The sound was too much for Aunt Marusya and she went back inside. The roar advanced on us, like an ocean, washing everything aside in its path. It was the wind. Our ears rang from the deafening howl. The ancient lime trees creaked. A yellow haze tore over the ground. Glass shattered. An unbelievably intense white light flared in this haze, followed by such a crash that it sounded like the entire dacha had been driven into the earth up to the roofline. A fiery yellow ball rolled along the treetops, hissing and smoking as it went before exploding with a sharp crack like an artillery shell.

'If only it would rain!' Aunt Marusya kept saying. 'If only it would rain!'

Finally, the rain fell. Grey torrents poured down onto the wind-blown park. The downpour droned

louder, picking up strength. The drum of the rain soothed us, and we went off to our separate rooms and fell fast asleep.

I awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of barking dogs and snorting horses, followed by hurried footsteps, laughter and the clatter of dishes. Gleb was also awake. The rain had stopped, but the lightning was still flashing.

'Kostik,' said Gleb, 'my prophetic soul tells me someone's just arrived. But I can't tell who. Listen.'

We lay there quietly for a few minutes. Gleb then jumped out of bed and began to dress in the dark.

'It's them!' he said. 'I hear the divine strains of Sasha's voice. It's the Karelins! Get up!'

I began throwing on my clothes. I could hear Aunt Marusya downstairs: 'Yes, Kostik's here. Oh, for a long time now. And Gleb too. We should get them up.'

'Let them sleep,' said Maria Trofimovna. 'We've got all day tomorrow to talk. I still don't know how we ever managed to make it. We waited two hours in Ryabchevka for the storm to pass. Thank God it's a sandy road or it would've been washed out.'

'Come on, let's go!' said Gleb.

'You go first.'

'Aha!' Gleb said. 'Nervous are you, young man?'

'Why should I be nervous?'

'Then let's go together!'

We went downstairs. The lamps were burning. Aunt Marusya had prepared tea. Wet suitcases were lined up against the wall. Maria Trofimovna was sitting at the table. Sasha rushed over to meet us and kissed Gleb and then me. She was frightfully thin, but her eyes shone just as before. We kissed Maria Trofimovna's hand.

'My, look how much sun you've had!' she said, stroking my cheek.

Lyuba was kneeling on the floor with her back to us and rummaging in a basket. She didn't bother to turn round and went on trying to find something.

'Lyuba,' said Maria Trofimovna, 'don't you see Kostik and Gleb are here?'

'Yes, just a minute,' she replied, slowly standing up. 'I can't find the lemons, Mama.'

'Don't bother, we can do without them.'

Lyuba turned around, smoothed her hair, and held out her hand. She gave me a quick glance and then looked away.

'Sit, everyone,' said Aunt Marusya, 'the tea's getting cold.'

We sat down at the table. Uncle Kolya was out on the verandah. I could hear him pouring water on someone's hands. Whoever it was was scrubbing and snorting and protesting: 'Please, for the love of God, don't trouble yourself. Thank you so much.'

'Who's that?' I asked Sasha.

She put her arm around my shoulder and whispered in my ear: 'Lenka Mikhelson. From Lyuba's college. An artist. A true *Wunderkind*. And an ass.'

'Who?' I asked again, confused.

'You'll see for yourself. I hate him.'

'Sasha!' Maria Trofimovna snapped. 'Stop whispering!'

Lyuba shot Sasha an annoyed look and then dropped her eyes.

Uncle Kolya came in from the verandah followed by a tall youth, busy drying his hands, in spectacles with a long face and large teeth. With a good-natured smile, he greeted Gleb and me. Although clumsy and terribly short-sighted, it was immediately apparent that, as Mama loved to say, he was from 'a good family'. He had manners and an air of confidence and was obviously one of those city types.

He took a seat at the table, accepted a cup of tea from Aunt Marusya, thanked her and said: 'Ah yes, there's nothing like country life!'

Gleb snorted. Aunt Marusya looked worriedly at Gleb and me, but then Sasha said: 'Lenka, here, have some jam. It's strawberry.' Uncle Kolya gave Gleb a stern look, which quickly turned into a smile.

After tea we helped the Karelins bring their things over to their dacha. The park gently rustled as it shook off the rain. The cocks crowed in the village in various keys. Dawn was breaking over the tops of the trees. The Karelins threw themselves into unpacking. The sun rose, gilding the verandah railing and casting its light on the uncommonly fresh and clean morning. Lenka Mikhelson stood outside the Karelins' dacha and doodled in the sandy path with a stick.

'What a morning! Let's go for a swim!' Gleb said, after we had lugged over the last of the luggage and been thrown out of the dacha by Maria Trofimovna, who refused to let us help unpack.

We got our towels and headed off to the bathing hut. On the way we saw what Lenka had been drawing in the sand: it was a profile very much like Lyuba's with a shining sun above it and the words 'O

golden light of braided sun!'

'What a Decadent!' Gleb fumed: 'Foolish nonsense!' He walked on, swinging his towel. Then, without looking at me, he said: 'Just forget about it, Kostik, don't give it a second thought. Seriously, forget about it. It's not worth letting it ruin your summer. Come on, I'll race you!'

He ran off with me right behind him. Frogs, fearing for their lives, jumped out of the way and into the wet grass. The white ball of the sun rose higher and higher. The sky, rinsed clean by the rain, shone brighter and brighter.

By the time I reached the bathing hut, I felt as if I was almost over my sadness. I was hot and out of breath, my heart was pounding, and I thought: Am I really going to torment myself over Lyuba, over some conceited girl, on such a beautiful morning as this when a nice long summer day stretches out before me? Uncle Kolya joined us. We swam, dived and splashed about so much that our waves rocked the water lilies up and down all the way over by the dam. I had almost forgotten that I had survived my first betrayal. All I wanted was to show Lyuba that it didn't upset me in the least and that my life was so full of such interesting things that it was just silly for me to suffer because of some summer romance with its sighs and shadowy confessions.

'It's true, isn't it?' I asked myself. 'Is my infatuation with Lyuba better than this sun?' Its rays were falling through the trees onto the dark water below. 'In what way is it better than the heavenly smell of these hayfields? In what way is it any better than this little beetle scurrying along the *banya* wall?' It was easy to console myself, perhaps because I was surrounded by so much rare beauty.

Gleb climbed up on top of the bathing hut, raised his arms to the sun and proclaimed in a mocking tone: 'O, golden light of braided sun!' and then jumped into the water with a yell.

'Hey, you ruffians,' said Uncle Kolya. 'Out of the water. After tea we're going to do some exploring.'

'Where?' I asked.

'Downriver, past Melovaya Hill.'

I climbed out of the water. It felt good to walk over the warm dry planks in my bare feet. I looked back at my wet footprints and watched them evaporate before my eyes. My towel smelled of sea salt. The sun warmed my body and my damp head, and all I wanted to do was talk and laugh and then race Gleb back to the dacha, which we did with Mordan and Chetvertak chasing after us, barking wildly, and trying to snatch the towels from our hands. We tore past the Karelins' place making a terrible racket and crashed onto the verandah, frightening poor Aunt Marusya.

After tea we went downriver with Uncle Kolya. Gleb and I drew a map as we walked and dreamed up names for every bend, backwater, cliff and tranquil site. We were thoroughly lashed by the branches and tall grass. Our shirts were yellow with pollen. The riverbanks smelled of sand and warm reeds. With a thoughtful air, Gleb said: 'I can't stand being melancholy.'

And so, the summer passed. Soon the hot days came to an end. Storms raged over the park and piled their clouds on the tops of the trees. The clouds became caught and left damp rags of mist behind in the branches as they tore themselves free and raced off to the horizon as if in fear. The park swayed and moaned. On the river the leaves of the water lilies stood straight up. The rain pounded on the roof. It was so loud on the top floor you felt as if you were inside a drum.

Everyone but Uncle Kolya, Gleb and I cursed the foul weather. We put on our raincoats and walked over to the dam, telling ourselves we needed to check the fishing lines we had put out the day before. The real reason we went, however, was to fill our lungs to bursting with the raw stormy wind. It was blowing so hard it plastered wet leaves torn from the trees to our faces. Our raincoats turned as stiff as wood. We found ourselves in the heart of the storm and had to turn our backs to the wind so we could breathe.

'Marvellous!' Uncle Kolya shouted. 'Absolutely marvellous! Just make sure you don't get blown away!'

'Ah yes, there's nothing like country life!' shouted Gleb. He was still making fun of Lenka Mikhelson.

We made a tour around our property. The old willows twisted violently, their branches stretched and torn in every direction, exposing the grey underside of their leaves. The trees fought against the wind with all their might, until they began to crack and splinter. Jackdaws rode the wind. We could see their open beaks but not hear their screams. There was one place behind the tall dam sheltered from the wind. We crawled down through the weeds to reach it. Nettles lashed our faces, but we felt nothing. Uncle Kolya kept his fishing rods hidden here behind a log. We took them out with shaking hands, as if we were a bunch of thieves. What would Aunt Marusya say if she saw us now, fishing in the midst of such a storm? It would prove to her we were indeed the lunatics she had always considered us to be.

We cast our lines. The wind howled just over our heads, but here in our little shelter all was quiet.

'We won't get any bites,' said Gleb. 'Fish aren't as crazy as we are!' He said it on purpose as if to reassure the fish that they were safe, but in fact he desperately wanted to catch one. And sure enough, as

if by a miracle our floats slowly sank below the surface of the cold water.

'You've both caught a carp!' shouted Uncle Kolya.

We began to pull in the strong, tin-coloured fish. The wind raged even harder. Rain thundered down onto the water. We didn't notice a thing.

'You're not frozen?' Uncle Kolya yelled.

'No! This is wonderful!'

'We'll keep fishing?'

'Of course!'

The storm lasted five days and finally ended one night. No one saw it happen. I woke up in the morning to the twitter of birds. The sun was struggling to pierce the fog that had swallowed the park. The fog was a light blue – evidently the sky above it was clear. Uncle Kolya had set up the samovar near the verandah. Smoke poured out of its pipe into the air. Upstairs we caught the aroma of burnt pinecones.

I lay in bed and looked out of the window. There before me, in the crown of an old lime tree, I beheld a miracle. A shaft of sunlight had broken through the leaves and, its refracted rays scattering here and there, ignited countless little lights of green and gold. It was a sight no painter could ever capture, especially not Lenka Mikhelson. In his pictures, the sky was orange, the trees were blue, and people's faces were the green of unripe melons. It was all just some sort of invention, as, perhaps, had been my infatuation with Lyuba. Whatever it might have been, I was now cured. I couldn't help wondering whether it was the long summer storm that had done the trick.

I watched as the sunlight penetrated deeper and deeper into the recesses of the tree. It fell on the season's first yellow leaf, then on a tomtit sitting on a twig, then on a raindrop, which hung there, quivering, just about to fall.

'Kostik, Gleb, do you hear that?' Uncle Kolya called up from down below.

'Hear what?'

'The cranes!'

We listened. Strange sounds came from the foggy blue, as if water were being poured back and forth up in the sky.

39

A Small Dose of Poison

The village chemist sometimes visited Uncle Kolya. His name was Lazar Borisovich. He struck us as a rather strange chemist. He wore an old student's uniform. A pince-nez, tied with a black string, balanced unsteadily over his wide nose. He was short and squat, with a thick beard that grew all the way up to his eyes and a wicked tongue.

Lazar Borisovich had been born in Vitebsk and attended Kharkov University, although he never took a degree. Now he lived over the local chemist's shop with his hunchbacked sister. We suspected he was somehow connected to the revolutionary movement. He always carried with him pamphlets by Plekhanov, every page of which he had marked up with his fat red and blue pencils, underlining certain words and passages and filling the margins with exclamation and question marks. On Sundays he visited some quiet corner of the park with his pamphlets, spread out his jacket, lay down and read, one leg crossed over the other, a heavy black boot swinging in the air.

One day I visited Lazar Borisovich at the shop to buy some powders for Aunt Marusya. She had come down with a migraine. I liked the chemist's shop. It was located in a clean old peasant hut with a covered floor, a geranium in one corner and shelves filled with porcelain jars. It smelled of medicinal herbs. Lazar Borisovich gathered the herbs himself and then dried them to make potions. I had never set foot in a house as creaky as this. Every floorboard made its own distinct squeak, as did the chairs, the wooden sofa, the shelves and the desk at which Lazar Borisovich wrote his prescriptions. His movements produced so many different rasps and scrapes that it seemed as if there were several fiddlers inside scraping their bows across tight, dry strings.

Lazar Borisovich knew every last one of these sounds and could tell exactly where each came from. 'Manya!' he would yell at his sister. 'Didn't you hear Vaska sneak into the kitchen? There's fish in there!'

Vaska was the chemist's mangy black cat. Sometimes the chemist said to us customers: 'Please don't sit on that sofa or the noise will drive me out of my mind.'

Grinding powders in his mortar, he liked to say that, thank God, the shop creaked less in damp weather than during dry spells. Then the mortar would let out a screech, the customer would jump, and Lazar Borisovich would say triumphantly: 'Aha! I see you also suffer from nerves!'

Now, as he prepared powders for Aunt Marusya, Lazar Borisovich produced a series of creaks and squeaks and said: 'The Greek philosopher Socrates was poisoned with hemlock. It's true! And we've got an entire forest of that hemlock growing right here, in the marsh down by the mill. I'm warning you. It's got white flowers that look like little umbrellas. The poison's in the roots. That said, in small doses poison is useful. I think all of us should sprinkle a little dose of poison in our food now and then to get us going and clear out the brain.'

'You believe in homeopathy?'

'As a psychological remedy? Yes!' Lazar Borisovich said with conviction. 'You're sceptical? All right then, let's try it out on you, as an experiment.'

I was curious, and so I said yes.

'I also know', he said, 'that being young gives you a certain licence, especially when you're just finishing school and about to go off to university. Your head must be like a merry-go-round. But still, it's high time you started doing some serious thinking!'

'About what?'

'As if you didn't know!' Lazar Borisovich exclaimed angrily. 'Here you are now, just starting out in life. Right? Well, what are you going to do with that life of yours, if I may ask? What are you going to be? How will you make your way? Do you really think you can just go on having a good time, fooling around, avoiding all responsibility? Life is not a holiday, young man! No! One thing I can tell you for certain – we are on the eve of great events. Yes! I assure you of that. I know your uncle Nikolai Grigorievich laughs at me, but we shall see who's right. And so, I'd like to know: what do you want to be?'

'I want to be . . .' I began.

'Never mind!' Lazar Borisovich interrupted. 'I know what you're going to say. That you want to be an

engineer, a doctor, a scholar or some such thing. None of this is important.'

'What is important then?'

'Jus-tice!' he shouted. 'You must be on the side of the people. You must be one with them, you must be for them. Be whatever you want, a dentist for all I care, but fight for a better life for the people. Got it?'

'But why are you telling me this?'

'Why? Just because, no special reason. You're a nice lad, but you don't really like to think too much. I noticed that long ago. So, please do me this favour – start using that mind of yours!'

'I'm going to be a writer,' I said, blushing.

'A writer?' Lazar Borisovich straightened his pince-nez and fixed me with a terrifying stare. 'Ha! And who doesn't want that? Maybe I'd like to be a Leo Tolstoy myself.'

'But I've already started to write . . . and have even been published.'

'Well then,' Lazar Borisovich said emphatically, 'please wait a minute. I'll just weigh these powders and then walk you back. We've got to clear this up.'

He was clearly excited, and twice dropped his pince-nez while weighing out the powders. We went out and walked through the field towards the river and from there to the park. The sun was setting in the woods beyond the river. Lazar Borisovich plucked the tops of the wormwood plants, crushed them and then smelled his fingers. He said: 'This is a big thing you want to do, and it demands a thorough knowledge of life. Am I right? And you have very little, if any, to be quite honest. A writer! Oh, he must know so much, it's terrifying just to imagine it. He must understand everything! He has to work like an ox and not chase after fame. Well, one thing I can tell you – you've got to go everywhere, you've got to see everything with your own eyes. Go to the peasants' huts, the markets, the factories, the shelters. Everything, everywhere. The theatres, the hospitals, the mines, the prisons. You must let yourself be steeped in life, let it impregnate you, like valerian in alcohol. This is the only way to create a true infusion. Then you can offer it to people as a miracle cure. In specified doses, of course. Yes, indeed!'

He went on talking about what it meant to be a writer for a long time. We parted outside the park.

'You're wrong to think I'm a lazy good-for-nothing,' I said.

'Oh, but I don't,' Lazar Borisovich said, grabbing my hand. 'I'm happy for you. You can see that. But admit that there's some truth in what I said, and now you've got something to really think about, after my little dose of poison. Eh?'

He peered into my eyes while still holding my hand. Then he sighed and walked away. I watched him walk across the field, a short and scraggy little man, plucking the wormwood as he went. Then he stopped, pulled a large penknife out of his pocket, squatted on his heels, and started digging some medicinal root out of the ground.

The chemist's experiment had worked. I realised that I knew almost nothing and had given little thought to so many important things. I took this funny little man's advice and soon went out into the world, into that school of life which no books or idle daydreaming can replace. It was hard, demanding work. Being young made it possible. I never even stopped to wonder whether or not I had the strength to make it through this school. I was certain I did.

That evening we all went over to Melovaya Hill – a steep cliff along the river overgrown with young pine trees. From there we looked out into the vast, warm autumn night. We sat down on the edge of the cliff. The water rushed over the dam below. The birds stirred in the trees, settling down for the night. The last lightning of the summer flashed over the woods. Then, for just a moment, you could make out some thin clouds like faint puffs of smoke along the horizon.

'What are you thinking about, Kostik?' Gleb asked.

'Nothing much . . . just thinking.'

I was thinking that I would never believe anyone who told me that this life – with its love, its longing for truth and happiness, with its summer lightning and its distant sound of water in the night – is without purpose and meaning. Each of us must struggle to affirm this life, everywhere and every day, as long as we live.

Book Two

RESTLESS YOUTH

40

‘Here Lives Nobody’

On Professor Gilyarov’s front door hung a brass plate with an inscription: ‘Here Lives Nobody’.

Gilyarov lectured on the history of philosophy to the students of Kiev University. Grey-haired, bearded and wearing a baggy, shiny jacket covered in tobacco ash, he would hurry up to the rostrum, grabbing hold of its edges with his knotty hands, and begin to speak in a dull, inarticulate, almost reluctant voice. Outside the windows of the auditorium, it appeared as if the gilded gardens of Kiev were on fire. Autumn in Kiev dragged on for a long time. Our southern summer amassed so much warm sun, so much greenery and so much scent in its city parks that it was loath to say goodbye to this bounty and make way for the approaching autumn. Almost every year, summer would wreak havoc on the calendar and delay its departure.

As soon as Gilyarov began to speak, we students were lost to the world around us. We followed the professor’s vague mumbling, transfixed by the miracle of the human mind. Gilyarov revealed it to us slowly, almost angrily. Entire epochs called out to one another across the centuries in his lectures. We could not escape the sensation that one could not divide the great flow of human thought into discrete blocks, that it was impossible to tell where philosophy stops and poetry begins, and where poetry merges into regular, everyday life. Sometimes Gilyarov would pull out of the bulging pocket of his jacket a small volume of poetry with an owl – the bird of wisdom – embossed on its cover and read a few lines, as a way to prove some philosophical point:

> Should our sun forget today
> Its path and lose its way,
> Some madman would have his say,
> Conjuring up a whole new world the very next day.

Once in a while the bristles on his cheeks would stand up and Gilyarov’s squinty eyes would laugh. This usually happened when he talked about learning to know ourselves. After these lectures I would be filled with a belief in the infinite power of the human mind. Gilyarov would yell at us. He commanded us not to bury our potential in the ground. We must work on ourselves like the devil to develop all that lay inside us. We must become like the experienced conductor who knows how to elicit every possible sound from his orchestra and can force even the most stubborn musician to play his instrument to the fullest. ‘Man’, Gilyarov liked to say, ‘must give meaning to life, he must enrich and beautify it.’

Gilyarov’s idealism was tainted with bitterness and a perpetual regret about its gradual decay. Among the many of his sayings that have stayed with me is the one about ‘idealism’s last sunset and its deathbed ideas’. This old professor, who looked a good deal like Émile Zola, had nothing but contempt for the prosperous bourgeoisie and the liberal intelligentsia of the day. Thus the brass plate on his door with its acknowledgement of man’s worthlessness. We understood, of course, that Gilyarov had hung it specifically to annoy his respectable neighbours. Gilyarov was always talking about one’s obligation to enrich life. But we did not know how, exactly, this was to be done. Fairly quickly I came to the conclusion that in my case this meant trying to express as deeply as possible my sincere kinship with the Russian people. But how? In what way? When I thought about it, it seemed to me that the truest path must lie in becoming a writer. It was then that I realised that the only possible road in life for me was writing, that writing was my only way forward.

It was at that moment that my adult life began – often difficult, occasionally joyous – but always restless and so varied and changing that it’s easy to get lost when trying to remember it all. My youth had begun with my final years at the gymnasium, and it ended with the First World War. It ended, in other words, sooner than it should have. But then my generation was fated to experience enough wars, coups, trials, hopes, troubles and joys to last several generations of our forefathers. In the amount of time it takes Jupiter to orbit the sun, we had experienced so much that just thinking about it makes my heart ache. Our progeny will, of course, envy us for having taken part in and witnessed such monumental events.

The university was the centre of all progressive thinking in the city. Like most of the new students, I was at first shy and nervous and at a loss when meeting the older students, especially those so-called 'eternal' ones. These bearded men in their shabby, unbuttoned coats looked upon us first-year students as mindless puppies. What's more, I simply could not get used to the fact that, unlike at the gymnasium, attendance at lectures was not mandatory and one could just as easily sit at home reading a book or spend the day out enjoying the city without fear of punishment. I gradually grew accustomed to the university and came to love it. It wasn't the lectures I loved, or the professors (there weren't many good ones), but the nature of university life itself. The lectures went on, in their own way, in the classrooms, while the turbulent and noisy life of the students went on in its own way, independent of the lectures, in the university's long, dark hallways. All day long, the hallways echoed with arguments, meetings were held here, associations came together, factions formed, all under thick clouds of tobacco smoke.

It was here I first learned about the violent disagreements among the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries, about the Bundists, the Dashnaks, Ukrainian nationalists and the Paole Zion party.[1] Despite their differences, all of them would come together to confront a common foe – the so-called White Shirts, members of the Academic Union, a Black Hundreds group. Quarrels with the White Shirts often led to physical brawls, especially when students from the Caucasus were involved.

In the boiling intensity of these passions one could already feel the approach of some new era. It seemed strange that just a few steps away from all this passion, behind the doors of the lecture halls, respected, elderly professors were lecturing in quiet boredom about the trading practices of the Hanseatic League or comparative linguistics. In those years before the First World War many people sensed the coming of the storm, but they could not foresee the violence it would unleash on the earth. The air was thick and heavy then in Russia, and in much of the world, as it is before a storm. But the storm had yet to break, and this gave those with little foresight a feeling of calm. Alarm signals were sounding in the morning mist around Kiev like flashes of light from a distant yet approaching storm – striking workers, arrests and exile, endless proclamations. But it took a sensitive ear to make out behind all this the threatening rumble of the storm itself. This is why its first deafening crash in the summer of 1914 with the outbreak of the war stunned everyone.

After leaving school we all soon lost track of each other even though we had sworn this would never happen. First came the war, followed by the revolution, and since then I have seen hardly any of my classmates. The cheerful Stanishevsky disappeared somewhere, along with the home-grown philosopher Fitsovsky, the reserved Shmukler, the sluggish Matusevich and the birdlike Bulgakov.

I was living in Kiev. Mama, Galya and my brother Dima, a student of the Technological Institute, were in Moscow. My other brother, Borya, was also in Kiev, but we almost never saw each other. He had married a short, plump woman, who went around in a lavender Japanese kimono embroidered with cranes. Borya spent his days hunched over his designs for concrete bridges. His dark room, with its imitation oak wallpaper, smelled of fixative. The floor was sticky with paint. Photographs of the international beauty Lina Cavalieri were pinned to the wall.

Borya did not approve of my interest in philosophy and literature. 'You must find your place in this world,' he liked to say. 'You're a dreamer, just like Papa. Entertaining people is not serious business.' He thought literature was merely for people's entertainment. I did not want to argue with him. I guarded my passion for literature from others' disapproval, and for this reason I stopped going to see Borya.

I was still living with our grandmother in the leafy Kievan suburb of Lukyanovka in a wing of the house deep in the garden. My room was filled with pots of fuchsias. I spent my days reading to the point of exhaustion. To get a bit of air, I would go out into the garden in the evening. The autumn air was cold and clear, and the stars shone through the barren trees. At first Grandmother would get cross and call me back inside, but then she got used to it and left me in peace. She would only say that I was just wasting my time, and this would inevitably lead to an attack of galloping consumption. But what could Grandmother do with my new friends? What could she object to about Pushkin or Heine, Fet or Leconte de Lisle, Dickens or Lermontov?

In the end, Grandmother washed her hands of me. She would sit in her room, light her lamp with its pink glass shade shaped like a large tulip, and lose herself in one of the infinite number of novels by Kraszewski. And I recalled the poet's lines: 'Only at night, like a call from the heart, / Do the stars' golden eyelashes sparkle in the dark.'[2] To me it seemed the earth was a repository for a great many treasures not unlike those golden eyelashes of the stars. I believed that life was preparing for me many fascinating things – encounters, loves, joys and sorrows, and shocks, and this premonition was the great happiness of my youth. What was to be, only the future could tell.

'And now,' as actors of old used to say to the audience before the play began, 'we shall present to you various incidents from real life and we shall try to make you reflect upon them, to make you laugh, and

to make you cry.’

[1] The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin) (1870–1924), and the Mensheviks, led by Yuly Martov (1873–1923), were the two main Marxist parties. The Socialist Revolutionary Party’s programme of agrarian socialism was popular among the Russian peasantry. The two main Jewish parties were the General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland and Russia (known as the Bund) and Paole Zion (‘Workers of Zion’), both of which were Marxist-socialist but were divided over the question of Zionism. The Dashnaks refers to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a nationalist-socialist organisation.

[2] From Fet’s 1864 poem ‘By Life Tormented’.

41

An Unprecedented Autumn

I took the train from Kiev to Moscow. There were three of us riding in the cramped box room alongside the carriage heater: an older land surveyor, a young woman in an Orenburg shawl and myself. The woman sat on the unlit metal stove while the surveyor and I took turns sitting on the floor; there wasn't room for two. Coal dust crunched under our feet. Before long the woman's white shawl had turned grey. Nothing could be seen through the window, which was also matted with grey dust and flecked with dried streaks of rain. It wasn't until we were outside Sukhinichi that I caught sight of an enormous blood-red sunset that filled the whole sky, a sight I've remembered to this day.

The surveyor, watching the sunset, said that out there, on the border, our soldiers were probably already fighting the Germans. The woman pressed the shawl to her face and started to cry: she was on her way to her husband in Tver and didn't know whether or not he'd already been sent off to the front. I was on my way to Moscow to say goodbye to my brother Dima, who had also been called up. I was too short-sighted to serve in the army. Moreover, I was the youngest son and a student, and according to the law in those days youngest sons and students were exempt from military service.

It was almost impossible to leave the carriage heater, so crowded was the train. Mobilised soldiers were everywhere – sprawled out on the steps and the buffers, lying on the roof. Passing through the stations we were met with women's wails, whistles, songs and the sound of accordions. The train would stop and immediately get stuck on the rails. It took two engines, and a heavy jolt, to get the overloaded train moving again.

Russia itself was on the move. Like a massive underground tremor, the war had loosened Russia from its foundations. In thousands of villages, church bells rang the alarm, announcing the mobilisation. Thousands of worn-out horses hauled peasant conscripts to the railheads from the most remote corners of the country. As the enemy invaded Russia from the west, a mighty human tidal wave rose up in the east to meet him. The entire country had been turned into an armed camp. Life became unrecognisable. Everything we had held as familiar and permanent had vanished in an instant.

For the whole way to Moscow the only food we had between the three of us was a stale loaf of bread with raisins and a bottle of cloudy water. It must have been for this reason that when I stepped out onto the damp platform at Bryansky station in Moscow I found the morning air so fresh and fragrant. The summer of 1914 was drawing to a close, that terrible and threatening first summer of war, and the Moscow air already held the smell of wilting leaves and stagnant ponds, those sweet, cool aromas of autumn.

Mama was living in Moscow then, near one of those ponds on Bolshaya Presnya Street. The flat's windows opened onto the Zoological Garden. You could see the ruins of the red brick houses on Presnenskaya Street shelled during the December uprising of '05 and the empty paths and the large, black pond of the Zoological Garden. The sunlight turned the pond scum into long green strips.

Never before had I seen a flat that so fully matched the character and life of its occupants as Mama's on Presnya Street. It was bare, almost devoid of furniture, except for the tables in the kitchen and a few creaky bentwood chairs. The old blackened trees cast shadows into the rooms, filling the flat with a gloomy chill that never lifted. The tabletops covered with dull, sticky oilcloths were just as cold. Mama had developed a passion for oilcloths. They had replaced her linen tablecloths and acted as a persistent reminder of our new poverty and of how Mama was doing everything possible in her power to keep the house neat and tidy as in days past. There was simply no other way for her to live. Only Mama and Galya were there when I arrived. Dima had left for the firing range at Gravornovo to train reservists.

In the two years since I had last seen Mama her face had wrinkled and yellowed, yet her thin lips remained tightly pursed as before, a sign for others that she would never surrender before life's hardships or the petty intrigues of her ill-wishers. Despite everything, she would come out the victor. As for Galya, she still wandered about the rooms, bumping blindly into the furniture, and questioning me about all sorts of nonsense: How much does a ticket from Kiev to Moscow cost now? Do they still have porters at the railway stations or have they all been sent off to the war? Mama seemed calmer than on previous visits. I hadn't expected this. I couldn't understand her mood, especially since Dima could be sent to the

front at any moment. Mama herself explained: 'Things are much better for us now, Kostik. Dima is an ensign, an officer, with good pay. I no longer worry that we won't be able to pay the rent.' She looked at me, uncomfortably, and added: 'Not everyone who goes to war gets killed. I'm certain Dima won't be sent to the front. His superior officers think highly of him.'

I agreed with her that not everyone gets killed. It would have been wrong to rob her of this meagre comfort. Looking at Mama, I understood how crushing this vulnerable daily existence was, how great was the universal need for a roof over one's head and a bit of bread. But I couldn't make peace with the thought that her happiness about the family's pitiful new-found prosperity came at the expense of exposing her son to danger. There was no way she couldn't have been aware of the risk. She had simply decided to try to ignore it.

Dima returned, suntanned and brimming with self-confidence. He undid his brand new sword with its gilded hilt and hung it up in the hall. In the evening, after their single electric bulb had been switched on, the hilt glittered. It was the sole piece of luxury in Mama's humble flat. Mama told me that Dima's plan to marry Margarita had fallen apart since, it turned out, in Mama's words, Margarita 'was quite an unpleasant individual'. I didn't say a word. A few days later Dima was posted to the Navaginsky Infantry Regiment. He packed up and left so quickly that Mama didn't have time to realise what was happening. It was not until the day after his departure that she cried. Dima's train was loading from a siding at Brestsky station. It was an ordinary day, a low sky and a mild wind blowing around some yellow dust, the kind of day you think nothing special can happen.

Our farewell with Dima was in keeping with the day. Dima was busy loading the men on the train. He spoke with us in brief snatches and then hurriedly said his goodbyes just as the train began to pull away. He raced after his carriage, jumped up onto the step, and then immediately disappeared from view behind an inbound train. Once the train had passed, Dima was no longer to be seen.

After Dima's departure I transferred from Kiev to Moscow University. Mama let Dima's room to an engineer named Zakharov who worked on the Moscow trams. To this day I still don't understand what Zakharov could have found appealing about our flat. Zakharov had studied in Belgium and lived for many years in Brussels before returning to Russia not long before the war. He was a cheerful bachelor with a short grey beard. He was fond of baggy, foreign-made suits and wore glasses that gave his eyes a penetrating appearance. The table in his room was piled high with books, none of them technical, I noticed, but mostly memoirs, novels and editions of *Knowledge*. It was among the stack on Zakharov's table that I came across for the first time French editions of Verhaeren, Maeterlinck and Rodenbach.[1]

Everyone that summer felt great admiration for Belgium, a small country which had taken the first blow of the German forces. We all sang the popular song about the defenders of besieged Liège. Belgium was smashed in a matter of days. It wore the crown of martyrdom. The Gothic stone lace of its city halls and cathedrals had collapsed and been ground into dust under the German soldiers' boots and their cannons' heavy wheels.

I read Verhaeren, Maeterlinck and Rodenbach, searching in their works for the clues to the riddle of their compatriots' bravery. But I did not find any clues, not in the dense complexities of Verhaeren's verse denouncing the evil of the old world, not in Rodenbach's novels, as dead and brittle as flowers set in ice, not in Maeterlinck's plays, written, so it seemed, in his sleep. Once I bumped into Zakharov on Tverskoy Boulevard. He took me by the arm and began to speak of the war, of this great blow to civilisation, of Belgium. He had a faint French accent.

Autumn that year in Moscow was magnificent. The trees' gilded leaves dropped onto the gun barrels. Weapons and boxes of ammunition lined the Moscow boulevards, waiting to be shipped to the front. Over the city migrating birds passed through a clear and unbelievably blue sky lit by the fading radiance of the sun. And all the time the leaves kept falling and falling. They piled up on the rooftops, on the pavements and on the roads, and whispered under the brooms of house porters and the shuffling feet of the passers-by, as if trying to remind us that all around lay the forgotten earth, and that for the sake of this very earth, for the sake of the faint lustre of September cobwebs, for the sake of the clear, dry views of the horizon, for the sake of still waters rippling from the fall of a bit of tree bark, for the sake of the yellowing broom shrubs, for the sake of all of Russia, humming with life and blessed with rare beauty, for the sake of its villages, its peasant huts, creamy smoke rising up over their thatched roofs, for the sake of the bluish mist over its rivers, for the sake of Russia's past and its future – for the sake of all this, every honest man and woman should come together and through their enormous united will put a stop to this war.

I understood, of course, that one could not count on this, that such thoughts were, as Borya loved to say, 'pure Quixotism'. I also understood that the enemy who had raised the sword against us and our culture might well die from the sword but would never sheath it unless forced. Like an unstoppable

force, the war moved ever closer. It seemed as if the smoke from its fires already clouded the skies over Moscow. And it truly was smoke, although not from the war, but from the burning forests and parched bogs near Tver.

Every morning when I awoke on the floor of my room – I had no bed – I looked through the window to see the leaves falling in the sky, twirling their way downwards. The windowsill cut off much of my view, and so all I could see was the sky; I never did know just where the leaves were landing. I couldn't free myself from the thought that this long, slow flight of leaves that went on day after day would quite possibly be my last. The leaves seemed to be flying from west to east, trying to save themselves from the war. I'm not ashamed to admit to such notions – I was very young then. The world appeared to be overflowing with lyrical power, a feeling that undoubtedly emanated from my own self. At the time I mistook this for the essence of life itself.

'Well, my friend,' said Zakharov, 'haven't you had enough by now of wandering around the city suburbs in your dreamy condition? Why, Maria Grigorievna told me that this week alone you've managed to take in both Arkhangelskoe and Ostankino.'[2] 'Take in' Zakharov said in a particular tone, the one he always used for Russian words he was still a bit unfamiliar with.

'Yes, I visited both Arkhangelskoe and Ostankino,' I admitted. 'But what sort of dreamy condition are you referring to?'

Zakharov grinned. 'You behave as if the world exists solely to fill your head with interesting ideas.'

'Well, so what?' I asked, getting angry. 'Why is everyone always accusing me of acting like a little boy?'

'It's just that you've made yourself sick reading all those modern poets,' he said. 'Yes, truly sick,' he added, pleased with himself.

'Judging by your books, you prefer literature to trams.'

'The fact is,' explained Zakharov, 'Belgium is *the* country of trams. And of mystical poetry. I was sent there while still a young boy. I made Belgium my home and graduated from the Institute of Engineering in Liège. But all this is beside the point. The point is there's a war on. That's what you need to recognise!'

Military music and lengthy cheers of 'Hurrah!' wafted in from Strastnaya Square. Reserve battalions were forming there in preparation for leaving for the front.

'I've just come from the square,' Zakharov added. 'I had forgotten so much about Russia. But it wasn't my fault. Anyway, I pushed through the crowd to the very front rows to get a good look at the soldiers. They smelled of bread. What a smell! Listening to the Russian people, you begin to believe no one can defeat them.'

'What about Belgium?' I asked.

'What about it? I don't understand.'

I grinned and then said the first thing that came to mind: 'And why do the Belgians fight so fearlessly against the Germans?'

'*Oh là là*! They're a small nation living on the memory of past greatness. I respect them for this. Take Maeterlinck. A mystical poet with a misty eye and misty ideas. The traditional Catholic God annoys him. He's simply too coarse for such a refined nature as Maeterlinck. And so, he replaced God with the Great Beyond – it's more up-to-date, more poetic. It's also a more deadly poison than religion itself. So be it. More importantly, Maeterlinck is a citizen. That's how he was raised, those are the traditions he grew up with. And as a citizen, he picks up his rifle and shoots with his mystical fingers just as well as any soldier in the king's army. No one cares about Maeterlinck the mystical-poet. But everyone cares about Maeterlinck the citizen. So, nobody bothers with his poetry. That's Belgium. What else is there to say? It's a wonderful country. It's swept by sea breezes and is full of happy people. People who know how to work, I'd add. What else do you want to know about Belgium? Anything? Well, okay then, enough about Belgium; let's talk about things closer to home.'

By 'closer to home' Zakharov meant offering me a job as a Moscow tram driver. 'The fact is,' he explained, 'practically all the conductors and drivers have been called up, and you can't expect a huge city to go without trams in wartime. They're hiring new conductors and drivers right now.'

I was taken aback. The transition from Maeterlinck to tram drivers had been too abrupt. Since my school days I had thought only of becoming a writer. I had learned to view all of life's unexpected turns as my training for this. One had to embrace life, not try to avoid it, for this was the only way to acquire experience, to build up that storehouse of ideas, moments, stories, words and images that I could later draw upon. Moreover, I knew that I couldn't leave Mama. She needed me now. And with this offer, a job and some money had fallen right into my hands. So I agreed. When I told Mama and Galya about my decision, Mama let out a sigh and said that she had never been ashamed of any sort of work and had tried to instil in us the same attitude. Galya, however, was worried: I might be electrocuted.

‘I read somewhere’, she said, trembling, ‘about a circus elephant electrocuted in a tram. Is that possible?’

‘Utter nonsense,’ I told her.

I had to get out and headed for the tavern on Kudrinskaya Street. It was filled with steam from the samovars. A mechanical instrument, a sort of organ referred to as the ‘machine’, was wildly churning away, its little bells and drums clanging like mad, and playing an old folk song: ‘Away the troika races, along the wintry ice of the Mother Volga . . .’

At the table next to me sat an old man in a jacket with a turned-up collar. He was busy writing something. He constantly dipped his quill in an inkwell, picked off little bits of fuzz, and then got back to writing. I felt like writing to one of my family members, or a friend, about myself, about how my life had changed so unexpectedly, about how I was going to be working as a driver on a tram, but in an instant I realised I had no one to write to. The ‘machine’ roared on – ‘The coachman fell silent, and angrily shoved the long whip back beneath his belt . . .’

So great was the noise that the empty glasses on the tables began to rattle and ring.

[1] Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), Symbolist playwright, poet, essayist, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1911); Georges Rodenbach (1855–98), journalist, poet and novelist remembered for his writings on life in Belgium.

[2] Respectively, the country estates of the princes Yusupov and the counts Sheremetev.

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The Copper Line

I was taken on as a driver and posted to the Miussky tram depot, but I didn't last long in that position. Soon I was made a conductor.

The Miussky yard was located on Lesnaya Street in a series of red-brick buildings covered in thick soot. Ever since those days I have disliked Lesnaya Street. I still consider it one of the dirtiest and ugliest in Moscow. My memory of the street is tied to the screech of trams as they crawled out of the depot's iron gates at dawn, the strap of my heavy conductor's satchel cutting into my shoulder and the sour smell of copper coins. The coins turned every conductor's hands green from handling them all day, especially if one had to work the 'Copper Line'.

The Copper Line was the name we gave to the B Line, which ran along the Garden Ring. None of us conductors liked the line, even though Muscovites affectionately called it 'the Bug'. We preferred to work on the 'Silver Line' – the A Line – on the Boulevard Ring. Muscovites had a pet name for this line as well – 'Annushka' they called it. That name was fine with us, but we found 'the Bug' ridiculous.

The Bug served the crowded railway station squares on the dusty edges of Moscow. Its cars had trailers for passengers with large and heavy items. Most of the passengers were from the outskirts of the city – craftsmen, market gardeners, women selling milk. They paid in coppers, saving their silver and taking it out of their pockets and purses only reluctantly. Thus, the name 'Copper Line'. The A Line was much smarter, serving the theatres and finer shops. The trams were all motorised – none were horse-drawn – and the passengers were different to those on the Bug – mostly well-educated urban types and state officials. The typical passenger paid in silver or bank-notes. Through the open windows of the A Line tram you could hear the rustling of the trees which lined the boulevards. The tram slowly circled the centre of Moscow, past the bronze figures of a weary Gogol and a serene Pushkin, past the Trubny Market with its incessant twittering of birds, past the Kremlin towers, past the enormous golden-headed bulk of Christ the Saviour Cathedral and the curved bridges over the shallow waters of the Moscow River.

We took the trams out in the early morning and returned after midnight or later. Back at the depot I had to hand over the daily receipts, after which I could go home. I liked to slowly wander the dark streets of Moscow, making my way down Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Street with my empty satchel over my shoulder. The nickel-plated badge with my conductor's number that I wore on my jacket glinted in the green light of the gas lamps. In those days only the main streets had electric lights.

At first, I took a long time to count the coppers before I could leave for home, but then Babaev – the old conductor who trained me – taught me how to get rid of them. From then on I returned to the depot at the end of my shift with nothing but large notes and some silver. The trick was quite simple. A couple of hours before returning to the yard we did everything possible to get rid of our small coins – change for a rouble we handed out only in copper and for three roubles, silver. Sometimes the passengers began to curse, and when they did we immediately acquiesced in order to avoid another avoidable quarrel in the tram. Babaev was full of such practical wisdom.

'Passengers are anxious nowadays,' he said. 'You have to make allowances. You have to treat them kindly, and you even have to let some of them ride for free. I, for example, can tell right away when someone gets on if they don't want to pay. It's written on their face. You can see they need the ride, but they're hiding from you in the back of the car – it's obvious they haven't got a single kopeck in their pocket. So don't force that passenger to buy a ticket. Act as if you've already sold them one, even making sure it was properly clipped. Being kind is always the right thing to do, and especially in our walk of life as conductors. We're dealing with the entire city of Moscow. And there's more human sorrow in Moscow than there are grains of sand on the beach.'

Babaev taught me all the basic things I needed to know for my job as a conductor – how to clip tickets, the different colours of the tickets for each day of the week (to stop passengers from using those of the previous day), how to turn in the car at the end of the day to the depot supervisor, the parts of the city where the passengers liked to hop off the moving tram and so you had to be extra careful in stopping the tram to avoid an accident. My training with Babaev lasted ten days, after which I took the conductor's

examination. The most difficult part was the geography of Moscow. We had to know every square, street and lane, every theatre, railway station, church and market. And not only know them by name but be able to say how to go from one to the other. No one knew Moscow better than us, except perhaps the droshky drivers. It is thanks to my work as a conductor that I got to know Moscow so well, this confused and diverse city with all its inns, taverns, hospitals and poorhouses, its districts, neighbourhoods and endless confusion of tangled streets.

The examiner was a rather caustic old man in a full-skirted coat. He would ask us in a mild voice as he sipped his cold tea: 'Now then, my good fellow, what's the quickest route from Marina Roshcha to Khamovniki? Eh? What's that? You don't know, do you? By the way, do you happen to know how it got such an awful name – Khamovniki? "*Kham*", why, that's a boor, a lout, that's what that is. Now, Moscow isn't known as a boorish place. Moscow was Russia's first capital, after all! It's just scandalous!'

The old man picked on us mercilessly. Half of us failed. Those who did went to complain to Chief Engineer Polivanov, a marvellously groomed gentleman with exquisite manners. With a slight tilt of the head, his silver hair parted neatly down the middle, Polivanov answered that knowledge of Moscow was essential to a conductor.

'A conductor is not just an animated ticket dispenser, but a guide to Moscow as well. It's a huge city. Not even old Muscovites know all of it. Just imagine the mess that would result if our conductors could not help passengers, especially those from out of town, find their way in this dizzying network of blind alleys, gates and churches.'

I soon realised that Polivanov was right.

I was assigned to Line 8 – the accursed railway station line, considered even worse than the B Line. This line connected Brestsky station with the three railway stations on Kalanchevskaya Square (Nikolaevsky, Yaroslavsky and Kazansky) and also ran through Sukharevskaya Square and along both New and Old Bozhedomka Streets. At Yaroslavsky station the tram was often 'over-run', as we conductors liked to say, by the train arriving from the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergius. The tram would be crammed with religious pilgrims and impecunious believers. Not knowing Moscow at all, these God-fearing old women wandered aimlessly from one church to another. The city left them as terrified and flustered as a brood of hens.

Day after day it was the same old story: one poor woman needed to go to the Church of St Nicholas the Miracle Worker on Chicken's Feet, another to the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity of Little Droplets and a third to the Church of St George on the Edge of the Field. You had to explain to the old woman very slowly and carefully how to get to each and every church, after which she pulled a handkerchief from a pocket in one of her underskirts. The handkerchief was always tied into thirds: one held her kopecks, another her two-kopeck coins, and the last her five-kopeck pieces.

She tugged and tugged at the tight knots with her teeth for a long time and then reluctantly counted out the fare. In her haste she often picked the wrong corner of the handkerchief. Then she had to tie it up tight again with her teeth and start on another. It was misery for us conductors. We were supposed to have handed out all the tickets by the time we reached Krasnye Vorota, but the old women were so slow that we never managed in time. The tram inspectors waiting at Krasnye Vorota, always on the lookout for the slightest mistake, fined us for working too slowly.

Once Babaev took me to his home. He lived with his daughter in a ramshackle little house near Paveletsky station. His daughter worked as a seamstress.

'Sanya, look here, I've brought you a fine young man,' Babaev bellowed cheerfully from the door.

I could hear her rummaging about behind a calico partition, but Sanya did not come out. A few cages covered with newspaper hung from the low ceiling. Babaev pulled off the newspaper to reveal several canaries that immediately began singing and hopping about in their cages.

'I find canaries restful after being around humans,' Babaev explained. 'Passengers feel no sense of shame before us conductors. They reveal their worst selves to us, and so it's not surprising we have a rather jaundiced view of humanity.'

Babaev was right. I don't know why, but people saved their worst behaviour for trams. Even courteous people became infected with boorishness as soon as they entered. At first this surprised me, then it began to get on my nerves, and in the end it depressed me so much that I found myself waiting for an opportunity to quit my job and regain my former friendly disposition towards people.

Sanya, a gaunt young woman, came out, nodded silently, placed a gramophone with a red trumpet on the table, wound it up and left. That was the last I saw of her. The gramophone played an aria from *Rigoletto*. Immediately the canaries fell silent and began to listen.

'I got the gramophone for the canaries. I'm teaching them to sing,' Babaev said. 'They're natural mimics.' He told me that canary owners had their own tavern in Moscow where they would meet on

Sundays with their birds for singing competitions that attracted large crowds. Even Chaliapin and the millionaire Mamontov had come once.[1] They were, of course, important, famous men, but didn't know the first thing about canaries. They wanted to buy two birds for an enormous sum, but their owners, after a series of apologies, turned them down since there was no good reason to entrust a canary to inexperienced hands. It was easy to spoil them, and a lot of work to keep and train them. Moreover, a canary isn't some plaything; the bird requires the proper handling. And so, Chaliapin and Mamontov went away empty-handed. An angry Chaliapin sang in his booming bass as he left, 'As the King went off to war . . .' Everyone rushed to grab their prized birds and hurried out of the tavern – the canary is a nervous creature and if frightened it may stop singing for good, and then it's not worth a single kopeck.

The dry autumn was followed by incessant rains. This was the most difficult time for us conductors. Draughty cars, floors covered with slippery mud and torn ticket stubs, the musty smell of wet clothing, smudgy windows, and outside, the never-ending procession of small, dark wooden houses and rain-lashed warehouse signs. On such days everything got on our nerves, especially the passengers' obnoxious habit of drawing faces (for some reason always with big noses) on the steamy windowpanes or plastering them with wet tickets. The tram was transformed into a dirty boarding house, its passengers a random bunch of quarrelsome boarders. Moscow seemed to fall in upon itself. The city hid under black umbrellas and the turned-up collars of overcoats. The streets emptied. Only the Sukharevka Market throbbed, like some vast sea, as the dingy waves of humanity rushed back and forth.

The tram had to fight its way through the noisy crowds of buyers, middlemen and sellers. Just inches from our wheels, the sound of Vyaltseva's alluring yet sinister voice hissed from the gramophones: 'Hurry on, troika, the snow is light and fluffy, and the night dark and cold!'[2] The music faded away, lost in the triumphant roar of the Primus stoves which, thrusting their whistling blue flames into the sky, submerged every last sound.

Damp mandolin strings jangled. Little toy rubber devils with enamelled crimson cheeks deflated towards their inevitable death: 'Away! Away!' they wheezed. Pancakes sizzled in enormous frying pans. The air smelled of horse dung, mutton, hay and carpenters' glue. Raspy voices haggled, followed by the loud slap of hands shaken over hard-fought bargains. Carts clattered. The thick, steamy breath of sweaty horses filled the trams' platforms. Chinese jugglers squatting on the streets shouted out in falsetto voices: 'Foo-foo! Abracadabra!' Church bells clanged, and from under the black gate of the Sukharev Tower a sobbing woman's voice cried out: 'Lay your pale hand on my withered breast.' Pickpockets swarmed about, a pair of trousers slung over one arm as though for sale. Their eyes were quick and evasive. Police whistles blew like nightingales. Shabby pigeons, released from inside the shirt fronts of little boys, beat their heavy wings, climbing into the muddy sky.

It is impossible to capture in words this gigantic Moscow bazaar that stretched practically from Samotëka to Krasnye Vorota. You could buy everything there – from a three-wheeled *vélocipède* to icons, from Siamese fighting fish to Tambov ham and cloudberry preserves. Yet all of it was somehow damaged, rusted, full of worm-holes or a bit smelly.

Gathered here were beggars, tramps, crooks, thieves and pedlars from every part of the Russian Empire – poor, scruffy, shifty people. The very air of the Sukharevka seemed to be filled with nothing but the hunger for easy money and a helping of calves' foot jelly. It was an unimaginable gathering of people from every epoch and condition – from the 'holy fool' with downcast eyes, clanking his rusty fetters and trying to catch a ride without buying a ticket, to the poet with the billygoat beard and green velours hat, from Tolstoyans, their bare feet red from the Sukharev mud, to corseted ladies who, as they crossed this same mud, made certain to lift their heavy skirts.

One dark rainy day a man in a black hat, a tightly buttoned-up coat and brown kid gloves entered my car on Yekaterinskaya Square. His long, well-groomed face expressed a stony indifference to the Moscow slush, the tram's squabbling passengers, me and everything else in the world. Yet he was most civil, this man: having received his ticket, he actually tipped his hat and thanked me. The other passengers were left dumbfounded by this, and they stared at this strange man with hostile curiosity. When he exited at Krasnye Vorota, the entire carriage unleashed a storm of jeers. 'Herr von Baron' they called him, and 'Russia's greatest forgotten actor'. I too was curious about this passenger with his haughty yet shy expression and the clear mixture of an accentuated refinement and provincial affectation.

A few days later I had an evening off and went to the Polytechnical Museum for a literary recital by the poet Igor Severyanin. 'What was my surprise', as writers used to say, when out onto the stage walked my passenger in a black frock coat. He leaned against the wall and, having lowered his eyes, stood waiting a good long while until all the excited shouting and applause died down. Dark red roses rained down at his feet, but he didn't bother to move and did not pick up a single one. Finally, he took a step forward, the hall fell silent, and I sat listening to the slightly burred singing of his verses that were filled

with music and the mood of the salons:

> Champagne in a lily! Champagne in a lily!
> It sparkles and shines with chastity.
> Mignon and Escamillo! Mignon and Escamillo!
> Champagne in a lily – 'tis a sacred wine.[3]

There was a certain magic in this, in the sing-song of these verses that had melody but no real meaning. It was language as music with no other demands upon it. Thought was replaced by the shimmer of sequins and the touch of perfumed satin, by the languid swaying of ostrich fans and the effervescence of champagne.

It was strange and outrageous to hear such words when thousands of Russian peasants were standing in trenches, up to their waists in mud, holding back the well-aimed gunfire of the advancing German army. And yet here was Lotarëv, the former realist writer from Cherepovets and now the 'genius' Igor Severyanin, chanting in a French accent lines about lovesick Nellie in her boudoir. In the end, he caught himself and began to sing a few affected verses about the war and how, were the last Russian commander to die, then he, Severyanin, 'our one and only, shall lead us all to Berlin'.

Such is life that even a drop of poetry can redeem the most insincere of men, and Severyanin had a good deal more than that in him. In later years he began to dispose of this frippery, and his voice became more human. The clean air of the countryside found its way into his poetry and its affectation was replaced by a lyrical simplicity: 'What tenderness ineffable, what warmth of heart enazures and endawns your face.'

•

I had few evenings off. My days were filled with gruelling work that stretched into the night, always on my feet, teeth clenched, hurrying the entire time. All of us conductors found it exhausting. When we had reached our limit, we asked our bosses to let us work for a few days on the 'steamer' – this is what we called the steam tram that ran from Savëlovsky station to the Petrovsko-Razumovskaya Agricultural Academy. The work here was the easiest of all the lines. It was the closest thing to what we conductors called 'country leave' that existed in Moscow.

The little steam engine, rather like a samovar, was hidden along with the funnel in a metal box. The only thing that gave away its presence was a feeble little whistle and some puffs of steam. It pulled four suburban carriages which were lit at night by candles since the 'steamer' had no electricity.

I worked on the line that autumn. I quickly handed out the tickets and then sat down on the open platform, mindlessly watching the beauty of the season flow past. My face felt damp from the remaining leaves in the stands of birch and aspen. These groves were followed by a blaze of colour from the academy's magnificent park. A golden stillness hung over it. The massed lime trees and maples, together with the lemon-yellow aspens, spread out before my eyes like the gateway to some luxuriant and peaceful realm. Here the many colours and textures of autumn had been subjugated to human will and talent. The entire park had been laid out by our finest botanists, true masters of the art of landscape.

Ever since childhood I had been under the power of a single passion – the love of nature. At times this passion became so intense it frightened my family. When I returned to school in the autumn from the Bryansk woods and Crimea, I was overcome by a painful longing to go back. I couldn't sleep and appeared to be withering away before everyone's eyes. I tried to hide my condition, for I knew it would provoke nothing but bewilderment. It was proof of my 'thoughtless attitude to life', which, according to my loved ones, characterised me and would always hold me back. How could I explain to them that my feeling for nature was more than just a sense of wonder at its perfection, more than a mere aesthetic enjoyment; rather it was an acknowledgement of that environment without which our full potential could not be realised. Most people think of nature as an escape, as a holiday. For me, life in nature ought to be our permanent condition.

I recall this now because back in the autumn of 1914 my feeling of connection to the natural world was unusually strong. Nature was also under attack by the war, not here, in Moscow, but there, in the west, in Poland, and this made my love for it all the stronger.

I watched the smoke from the funnel of the 'steamer' drift across the yellowing groves. Just beyond, in the evenings, the faint bluish glow of Moscow could be seen. The sight of these trees on the far edge of the city conjured up all sorts of thoughts about Russia, about Chekhov, Levitan, the Russian spirit, about the creative talents buried in our people, their past and their future, which, no doubt, was certain to astound us all.

[1] Fëdor Chaliapin (1873–1938), famed opera singer; Savva Mamontov (1841–1918), industrialist and arts patron.

[2] Anastasia Vyaltseva (1871–1913), popular mezzo-soprano known as the ‘Queen of the Gramophone’.

[3] From ‘Champagne Polonaise’ (1912) by Igor Lotarëv (pen name Severyanin) (1887–1941), one of the Ego-Futurist poets. The line ‘What tenderness ineffable’ on page 318 comes from his ‘Trait upon Trait’ (1914).

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To One Side of the War

Now that almost half a century has passed since the First World War, I think of those still relatively recent days as a distant past, as if shrouded in the mists of legend. A thunderous century seems to lie in between, splitting our lives in two. Everything has shifted. Everything has moved, as though displaced by a sudden blow. Now we are amused by what we once considered important. We are indulgent towards our former thoughtlessness and towards our inability to make sense of life's cunning designs, of our relationships and of our own selves. Now we think of everything prior to 1917 as our childhood, even though by then the men and women of my generation were already in their twenties.

The war of 1914 did not possess our consciousness so completely as would all that was to come later. In Russia at that time there was a margin of life that continued off to one side of the war. The hall of the Polytechnical Museum filled to bursting every time the Futurists or Igor Severyanin performed. Everyone was fascinated with Rabindranath Tagore. The Moscow Arts Theatre convulsed with agony as it searched for a new Hamlet. In Moscow, the 'literary Wednesdays' continued at the home of the writer Teleshov, although the writers at these gatherings rarely discussed the war. Religious philosophy, God-seeking, symbolism, calls to revive Hellenic philosophy – all this coexisted with progressive revolutionary thought and sought to win over converts.

My family belonged to the middling stratum of the intelligentsia. My father was a statistician. Like most statisticians of the time, Father had been a liberal. From my earliest childhood I heard Father and his friends talk about freedom, about the inevitability of revolution, and about the wretched condition of the people. These discussions invariably took place over tea at the dining room table, and every time Mama would alert the men with her eyes to the presence of us children as she said to Father: 'Georgy, you're getting carried away, as always.'

To me, 'the people', those suffering, beaten-down millions, meant the peasants. I had heard little of the workers. In our circles one rarely used the term 'the proletariat'. Sometimes people spoke of 'artisans' and 'factory hands', and these words conjured up for me the industrial outskirts of Kiev, crowded barracks and strikes.

Every time I heard these words – 'the proletariat' and 'the working class' – for some reason I had the impression that the only proletariat in Russia was to be found in sooty Petrograd, and then only in a few enormous factories, such as the Putilov or Obukhov steel works. Such naïve childish notions and my passion for literature meant that up until the February Revolution I didn't know the first thing about the revolutionary movement.

The word 'revolutionary' meant nothing more to me than someone terribly brave, unbending and selfless. Not that I had been completely ignorant of the revolutionary movement in my youth. I had witnessed the events of 1905, knew well the details of the December uprising in Moscow, the story of the Moscow–Kazan Railway, and the mutinies on the battleships *Potëmkin* and *Ochakov*, and I bowed my head before Lieutenant Schmidt. Nevertheless, it was chiefly the romance of it all that excited me – the secret underground printing presses, dynamite, infernal machines, escapes from Siberian exile, fiery speeches. As for the larger significance, I had nothing but a vague notion that could be summed up as 'the struggle for freedom'.

I lived with these ideas up until the outbreak of war in 1914. Only then did I begin to comprehend the larger social forces at work in Russia. In 1914, Moscow was far away from the front. The only reminders of the war were the great many wounded men in brown hospital gowns wandering about the city and women in mourning. One evening I got up the courage to attend one of the 'literary Wednesdays'. The writers met in an old mansion in a quiet lane near Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Street. I took a seat in the back row and didn't get up until the end of the evening. I was afraid someone would notice and ask me to leave, just like some ticketless passenger, even though I was surrounded by a number of young men and women no different to myself. They all behaved as if they belonged there, which only made me feel more out of place.

My face was hot – I had never been this close to real writers before. I could not shake off the thought that even though they were all dressed in ordinary clothes and spoke the same words as all the rest of us

mere mortals, still an enormous gulf separated us. This gulf was called talent, a mastery over ideas, images and words – everything, in short, that at the time I believed to be a kind of magic. I looked upon each and every one of these writers as the direct heirs of Turgenev, Chekhov and Tolstoy, the appointed guardians of the traditions of Russian literature.

Back then I could not accept Pushkin's words that writers and poets were at times the greatest scoundrels in the world. I was unable to separate the author from his body of work. And so it was with equal excitement that I gazed at Alexei Tolstoy's coachman's haircut, at the tousled head of Ivan Shmelëv, who looked like a land surveyor, at the meek face of Zaitsev and at the icy Bunin, who was reading his story 'The Psalm' in a monotone.[1]

I had hoped to see Maxim Gorky at this 'Wednesday', but he wasn't there. Sitting next to me was a consumptive old man who appeared to be made up entirely of wrinkles. He coughed the whole time into a dark handkerchief and his eyes glistened – he apparently had a fever. He was following every word spoken by the writers seated before us on a platform and would turn to me, saying: 'Oh, isn't Russia wonderful! Oh, just wonderful!'

We left together. He lived out beyond Presnenskaya Square, in the same direction as me, and so we walked along side by side. A grey moon shone through the bare trees. Frozen leaves crunched under our feet. Light from the windows fell on my companion's pork-pie astrakhan hat. It turned out he was a typesetter at Sytin's.[2] His name was Yelisey Sverchkov.

'I was born in the provinces,' he said, stopping for a minute to cough. 'In the town of Kashin. I always wanted to be a writer, but I don't have the skill for it. Words simply don't come to me. I have a good feel for words, you might say, I know their nuances, their subtleties, but I can't marshal them into any proper order. There are many meanings hidden in every word, and it's the writer's job to place one word next to another in just such a way, my young man, that it will strike the right note in the reader's heart. That's where talent comes in. Inspiration! A writer doesn't search for words, doesn't select them – he seizes on the necessary word in an instant, just as a typesetter grabs the necessary letter from his tray without having to look. And once he's put it there, not even the devil himself could make him give it up, for if he did the entire beautiful edifice would come crashing down.'

'Have you tried to write?' I asked the typesetter.

'I've tried and tried. And I'm still trying. But it's no use. I have this habit – on my days off I visit either the Tretyakov or the Rumyantsev Gallery. I pick one painting I like and look at it and try to place myself inside it, as if I were a participant in what's being depicted. Take, for example, Savrasov's *The Rooks Have Come Back*.[3] Or Levitan's *March*. My entire childhood is captured in Savrasov's painting. A slushy Russian spring, puddles, a cold wind, low clouds, wet fences. Levitan's *March* is another kind of spring, although still unmistakably ours, truly very Russian – a bright blue sky over the trees, and the drip-drip of thawing snow and melting icicles, a ray of sunshine in every drop of water as it falls from the roof. I see it all so clearly. And then I go home and try to recreate with words in my notebook everything I've seen, to paint, as it were, with words just as the artist paints with umber and sienna and cobalt. I want the reader to have an image in his head that corresponds exactly with the painting, as if he'd seen it himself. I want him to smell the manure, if you'll excuse me, and hear the rooks. I have done more than a hundred of these descriptions. I showed them a while ago to a writer – I'm not going to say who. I was so nervous. It was embarrassing. He read them and said: "Yes, it's quite literary, and the grammar's fine, but what's the point? I'd rather go and look at the paintings myself than read your descriptions of them. What made you want to try to compete with Savrasov, Levitan or Korovin?[4] They knew what they were doing. You're not going to teach them anything."

'I tried to explain: "Well, I had this idea of developing the written word to such a point that it would have a visual effect on the reader, just like the way an artist uses paint on a canvas."

'"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," he said.

'With that I walked away. Still, I did learn one thing: I have no talent for writing! It's a pity, but true. If I did, I'm certain I could create some amazing works.'

I accompanied the typesetter home. He lived at the back of a narrow courtyard that was piled high with rusty old bedsteads. There was a bedstead manufactory in one of the building's wings. Sverchkov asked me to come and visit sometime and then added: 'I live here surrounded by beds, yet I sleep on a broken-down old trestle board. These here are all old. They were donated. They'll be fixed up and distributed to military hospitals. On account of the war. I don't understand this war. It's the result of a lack of basic friendship among people. If ordinary people like us just got together and said in one voice "No!", well, that would put an end to all this bloody business. That's my dream – that someone will come along and teach us how to be friends. Is it possible there's no one on earth who could do that?'

He rapped on a little window. No one responded, but I heard a woman burst into angry sobs.

‘She doesn’t understand!’ sighed Sverchkov. ‘The weaker sex. I’ve got no more than a year to live, but she just doesn’t understand. You’ll have to excuse me, young man.’

I said goodbye and left. It was so quiet out on Bolshaya Presnya Street that you could hear the yawns of the night watchmen. The tiled shopfronts of Chichkin’s and Blandov’s dairies, one white, the other blue, gleamed softly in the lamplight. Whenever Chichkin opened one of his white-tiled shops, Blandov was sure to open a blue-tiled shop just opposite in the hope of stealing his customers.

Everyone was already asleep at home. Even Zakharov’s room was dark. I went to my room and lay down on the floor. The gaslight outside shone faintly through my window.

I lay there thinking about the typesetter from Kashin. My thoughts didn’t upset me, rather they brought with them a feeling of peace. It was clear there were so many exceptionally talented men and women in this country. No one knew how many of them there were scattered about in Russia’s towns and villages. Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands? How much thought, energy and time they gave to improving, enriching, celebrating and glorifying their country.

The typesetter had been right, of course – you could perform miracles with the Russian language. There was nothing in our experience, no thought or sensation, that couldn’t be expressed in Russian. Music, colours, light, the rustling shadows of gardens, the ambiguity of dreams, the rumbling of storms, the whisper of children, the crash of waves along the beach – for all this and more we could find in our language the exact expression.

It’s easy to think in the city at night, when the only sounds are the distant whistling of trains or the occasional clatter of a passing droshky over the cobblestones. I got up, went over to the window and stood staring for a long time at the Zoological Garden. It looked like a giant black island surrounded by the dimly lit streets of Moscow. I turned round and saw a patch of white on the table. I thought it must be a note from Mama. I picked it up, lit a match and read the uneven lines of a telegram from Kiev:

> Posted to sapper unit leaving for western front address to follow will write more when able don’t worry kisses to you Galya Kostik Borya

So now Borya was off as well! I was suddenly overcome with shame. Why had I felt so superior to him? Just because of my woolly attraction to art? Not having written a single worthwhile line, for some reason I already considered myself among the elect. I had laughed at his room, his concrete bridges, his down-to-earth philosophy. But what was funny about it? At least he was honest. He worked like an ox, never lied and never dodged his obligations. So what if he preferred Henryk Sienkiewicz to Chekhov? Was there some sin in this? I, who had been such an enemy of other people’s prejudices, had fallen under the sway of the pettiest of prejudices.

I lit a second match and read the telegram once more. I wondered: why had Mama not waited up for me instead of leaving the telegram on my table? Why? Could it be because she knew what I thought of Borya, and she couldn’t bear to see it written on my face at such a difficult moment?

I got dressed and went to see Mama. She was not asleep. I sat down next to her and stroked her dry grey hair, at a loss as to how I might try to comfort her. She cried softly so as not to wake Galya.

I realised then how cruel and unjust young people can be, even if their heads are filled with lofty ideas.

Mama didn’t fall asleep until dawn. I went back to my room, put on my conductor’s uniform, grabbed my empty satchel and tiptoed out. A dim light filtered through the dirty windows onto the stairs. I picked my way down through the old tomcats that lay splayed out asleep on the steps. Two-wheeled hospital carts, with red crosses painted on their green tarpaulins, rumbled down Bolshaya Gruzinsksya Street on their way to the Brestsky goods station. Crinkly dry leaves from the lilac trees in the Zoological Garden were being driven along the pavement. Big drops of a heavy morning rain began to fall, drumming on the carts’ roofs and drenching the dusty leaves.

[1] Alexei Tolstoy (1882–1945), prolific writer, distant relation of Leo Tolstoy, later supporter of the Soviet regime; Ivan Shmelëv (1873–1950), writer and publisher, emigrated in 1922; Boris Zaitsev (1881–1972), writer and dramatist, also emigrated in 1922.

[2] Ivan Sytin (1851–1934), prominent Moscow publisher.

[3] Alexei Savrasov (1830–97), painter, member of the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) group.

[4] Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939), Russian Impressionist painter.

44

The Old Man with the Hundred-Rouble Ticket

It's an old truth that people who are always on the move – engine drivers, sailors, pilots, chauffeurs – tend to be rather superstitious. And so were we, the conductors of the Moscow tramway system.

We were most superstitious when it came to an old man with a hundred-rouble note, the so-called Katerinka. The note was engraved with a magnificent portrait of Catherine the Great in a tight satin bodice.

To be fair, the old man was in fact quite pleasant – clean, kind and well mannered. In the pocket of his overcoat he always carried a perfectly folded copy of the *Russian News*, the beloved newspaper of the liberal upper classes.

The old man always boarded the tram early in the morning just as we were pulling out of the park and had nothing more than sixty kopecks of change on us. We were never given any more than that to start our day. He always got on and smiled impishly as he handed his hundred-rouble note to the conductor. Of course, the conductor never had enough change. But the old man never made a fuss and just quietly got off at the first stop and waited for the next tram.

The same interaction repeated itself with the following tram. And so, getting on and then off one tram after another, the old man rode to work for free day after day, month after month. There was nothing we could do about it.

It was always the exact same hundred-rouble note. We, the conductors working Line 8, had memorised its serial number – 123715. Sometimes we lost our temper with the old man and said: 'Present your "Katerinka" 123715 and then get off.' The old man was never offended. He happily presented the banknote to the conductor and then just as happily left the tram, hurrying so as not to be a bother to anyone. Such deviousness to avoid purchasing a ticket was unprecedented, yet even the fiercest of the conductors was helpless to stop him. But the reason we disliked the old man was not because of that 'Katerinka' but because, according to all the longtime conductors who had known him for years, he always brought bad luck. I experienced this myself four times while working on the trams. My first job, as a driver on the B Line, was awful. The trams had trailers, and the couplings were so old and worn that it was impossible to start up without jolting the trailers, which was always followed by loud curses from the passengers.

One day a white Chichkin milk truck cut in front of me on Smolensky Boulevard. It then proceeded to drive straight down the tracks, but exceedingly slowly, as if the driver feared spilling his load. I had no option but to slow right down as well, and soon was arriving late at all my stops, now crowded with angry passengers. It wasn't long before another B tram caught up with me, followed by a second, then a third and finally even a fourth. All of them began rattling furiously. In those days, motorised trams had electric rattles, not horns. The entire line was jammed, but the milk driver just drove on in front of me and refused to clear off the rails.

And so we went down the entire length of Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya Street, past Tverskaya Street, Malaya Dmitrovka Street and Karetny Row. I rattled like mad, leaned out and cursed, but the driver's only response was a few puffs of tobacco smoke from his window. By now the row of 'Bugs', packed with passengers and rattling around the Garden Ring, stretched as far as the eye could see. The drivers' cursing shook the air. The wave of noise started at the very last tram, broke over me, and then rolled back in a mighty wave.

Driven to despair, I knew I had to act. As we started down the slope at Samotëka I switched the engine off and, gesticulating as though my brakes had failed, let the tram run free. With a deafening crash, we ploughed into the back of Chichkin's milk truck. There was a sound something like a gunshot, and then the truck ended up on its side, pouring white smoke. The whiskered driver climbed out, pulled a police whistle from his pocket and began to blow with all his might. I had not seen this coming. Suddenly, two policemen, clutching their swords, began racing across Samotëchnaya Square towards the tram. The next day I found myself demoted from driver to conductor.

But this wasn't the end of my misadventures. Soon after I was fined for sitting on the rear platform as we crossed Teatralnaya Square. Conductors were expected to stand here since the square was one of the

busiest spots in Moscow and passengers were always hopping on and off even while the tram was in motion.

Some of us young conductors came up with a plan to get in a little rest on what was always an insanely busy day. It seemed clever at the time, but we were quite mistaken. We convinced the drivers to leave the last stop two or three minutes ahead of schedule and not be bothered with 'maintaining the proper interval' as mandated. The driver went at full speed until he caught up with the tram in front. We watched as all the waiting passengers climbed into that tram and we proceeded on empty and quiet. We could even sit down and read the newspaper. It seemed foolproof. But there was the proverbial banana skin. The plan was working so well that we decided to take three or four circuits around Moscow at a time to avoid having to pick up any passengers. Soon, our takings fell way below those of the other conductors. Our bosses became suspicious. In the end, they caught onto our little game and slapped us with heavy fines.

None of these troubles could be attributed to the old man with the hundred-rouble note. Yet one day he entered my carriage and his appearance struck me as more suspicious and threatening than ever – the old man was positively beaming at me. Perhaps this was because I had overlooked him, and he had managed to ride two stops for free. After he got off, the driver, a taciturn and morose fellow, slid open the door of his cabin with a loud screech and shouted down the length of the carriage to me: 'Conductor, open your eyes! Look out for some sort of trouble!' And then he slammed the door shut.

I kept a lookout for trouble the entire rest of the day, but nothing happened. I calmed down. At midnight we rolled out of Yaroslavsky station on our last round. The tram was almost empty, and everything seemed fine. I began humming a popular tune to myself: 'Tell me, little birdie! Have you got some change for me . . .'

At Orlikov Lane a stout gentleman in an overcoat with a fashionable roll collar and an elegant bowler got on. Everything about him spoke of wealth and status: his slightly puffy eyes, the smell of fragrant cigar smoke, the white silk muffler of foreign make, the walking stick with a silver knob. He walked down the entire length of the tram, leaning heavily on his stick and moving uncomfortably like someone with gout, and then dropped into a seat by the exit. I went over to him.

'Free travel!' the man said curtly. He didn't bother looking at me, but was staring out of the window at the lights of the city.

'Your pass!' I said, just as curtly.

He raised his puffy eyes and gave me a look of contempt. 'You ought to know who you're dealing with, young man,' he said angrily. 'I'm Mayor Bryansky.'

'Unfortunately, it's not written on your forehead,' I shot back. 'Show me your pass!'

The mayor flew into a temper and refused. I stopped the tram and asked him to get out. He refused to budge. At this point, the other passengers graciously decided to weigh in on the matter.

'He's no mayor!' came a mocking voice from far back in the tram. 'The mayor has his own carriage and pair. Everyone knows that. Some mayor he is!'

'Mind your own business!' shouted the man in the bowler.

'Heavens! What a loud voice he has!' an old woman with a bag of apples said nervously. 'The rich are all like that – too cheap to spend five kopecks on a ticket. That's how they make their pile, by saving a kopeck here and there.'

'Maybe he's broke,' joked a young man in a cloth cap. 'I'll pay for his ticket. Here, conductor! And give him the change so he can buy himself something to eat.'

In the end the outraged mayor got out, slamming the door so hard behind him that all the glass shook. For this the driver delivered a string of comments addressed to the man in reference to his bad manners, his hat and his fat mug.

Two days later I was summoned by the head of the Miussky Yard, a humorous man with an enormous red beard who said in a loud voice: 'Conductor 217! This is your second reprimand. Sign here! Fine, and now go and light a candle to Our Lady of Iversk for getting you off so lightly. Who ever heard of such a thing? Tossing the mayor out of the tram! And at night, and on Third Meshchanskaya Street no less, where a man isn't safe even by day!'

He demanded that I tell him every last detail of the entire story with the mayor. So I did, making sure to also tell him about the old man with the hundred-rouble note and how we conductors were all convinced he was bad luck.

'I've heard about this old devil,' said the head of the yard. 'I wish we could find some way to trip him up.'

The conductors of Line 8 had been dreaming about this for a long time. Each of us had our plan, including me. I told it to the yard head, and he just laughed. Nevertheless, the next morning I was given

one hundred roubles in small notes, for which I had to sign. I waited three days for the old man. On the fourth day, he finally appeared. Not suspecting a thing, the usual calm, innocent smile on his face, he got in and handed me his 'Katerinka'. I took it, turned it over, examined it in the light, and then tucked it into my satchel. His jaw dropped with surprise. I slowly counted out ninety-nine roubles and ninety-five kopecks, counted it one more time to be certain, and then handed the old man his change. He presented a terrifying sight – his face was black with rage, and his eyes yellow with bile. I would have been afraid to run into him in a deserted alley. He silently took the change, stuffed it uncounted into his coat pocket, and headed towards the door.

'Where are you going?' I asked him politely. 'You finally have a ticket. Now you can ride as much as you like.'

'Bastard!' the old man spat. He opened the front door and got off at the next stop, no doubt out of habit. When the tram started up, he whacked the outside of the door as hard as he could with his heavy stick and yelled once more: 'Bastard! Swindler! I'll show you!'

I never saw him again after that. Some of the conductors, however, did claim to have seen him again, walking briskly to his office, a neatly folded copy of the *Russian News* stuck into the pocket of his overcoat. The hundred-rouble note (serial number 123715) was mounted, like a trophy, on a special notice board behind a wire cage typically used for official notices. It hung there for a few days. The conductors crowded around to have a good look at it and laugh. I gained a dubious reputation for resourcefulness. This reputation saved me from being fired when an inspector caught me giving a free ride to twenty armed men.

It was nighttime. Soldiers in battle dress – with cartridge boxes, rifles and tightly belted brand-new greatcoats – got on at Yaroslavsky station. Bearded men with weather-beaten faces, they were reservists, fresh up from the country and intimidated by big, unfamiliar Moscow. They were on their way to Brestsky station, and from there to the front. Three of them were accompanied by their wives, whose faces were muffled up to their eyes in their shawls. They clung to their men's coat sleeves and didn't say a word. Neither did the soldiers. I had committed two offences. Not only had I allowed the soldiers and their wives to ride for free, but I had also permitted armed men onto the tram, which was strictly forbidden.

An inspector got on at Yekaterinskaya Square.

'You needn't bother checking,' I told him. 'The soldiers don't have any tickets.

'Charging it to the king of Denmark, are you?' he asked matter-of-factly.

'Yes, that's right, the king of Denmark.'

'A nice state of affairs,' he muttered as he took down my number and then jumped off without waiting until the next stop.

Soon after I was summoned again to the depot's red-bearded head. He looked at me for a long time, raised his eyebrows quizzically, and then appeared to come to a decision. 'You', he said, dropping his usual informal '*ty*' for the formal form of address, 'are incapable of working with passengers. That's obvious! My Lord, you already have three reprimands!'

'Well, fine then, fire me.'

'That'd be easy. But that's not the point. I'm going to transfer you to our nighttime hospital service instead. You'll pick up the wounded at the stations and deliver them to the various hospitals. You're a student, right?'

I told him I was and accepted. I was grateful, for this work seemed nobler than the exhausting daily tussle with passengers, tickets and change. Relieved, I handed over my satchel to the foreman and went home. I walked along Bolshaya Gruzinskaya Street. The gaslights flickered in the wind. The night air smelled faintly of gas and seemed to presage changes, travel and new adventures.

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Lefortovo Nights

Bathed in the hissing, chalky incandescence of arc lights, Brestsky station was at the time the main army transport junction for Moscow. Troops embarked here for the front. At night, long hospital trains smelling of chloroform moved stealthily up to its darkened platforms and unloaded their wounded.

Every night around two o'clock, when the city lay asleep, we drove our white trams to Brestsky station. Special camp beds on springs had been set up in all the cars. We had to wait a long time and hung about smoking alongside the cars. Women in heavy shawls kept coming up and quietly asking us if it would soon be time to load the wounded. This expression – 'load the wounded', meaning to haul men who, though still alive, had been ripped to shreds, as if they were so much inanimate freight – was one of the absurdities of the war.

'Just wait!' we told them.

With a heavy sigh, the women went back out to wait silently in the shadows on the street, their eyes trained on the big station doors. The women came to the station every night in the hope of finding among the wounded a husband, a brother, a son or someone from a regiment who might give them news of a loved one. Despite our differences in age, personality and political views, all of us conductors feared nothing more than one of these women discovering a badly maimed relation among the wounded.

As soon as the orderlies appeared at the station doors with the stretchers, the women swarmed around them, peering into the blackened faces of the wounded, pressing bread, apples or cheap cigarettes into their hands. Others just stood about sobbing. Stifling their moans, the wounded comforted them with homespun words – the kind of words every simple Russian keeps ready for a rainy day and shares only with others just as simple as himself.

The men were loaded into the trams, and we started our slow, careful trip through the Moscow night. We usually took the soldiers to the main military hospital in Lefortovo. Ever since then Lefortovo has reminded me of cold autumn nights. Many years have passed, but when I think of Lefortovo now, I still picture it on just such a night, the hospital looming out of the dark with its long, monotonous rows of lighted windows. I can't rid myself of this image because I have never been back to Lefortovo and I never did see it, or the wide square in front of the hospital, in daylight.

At Lefortovo we helped the orderlies carry the badly wounded to the wards or out to the huts scattered about deep in the park some distance from the main building. A noisy stream ran through a gully; it smelled of chlorine. We had to carry the men slowly, and so we often worked at Lefortovo until it was almost dawn.

Sometimes we cared for wounded Austrians. We jokingly referred to Austria at the time as the 'Rag-and-Bone Empire' and the Austrian army as a 'Gypsy bazaar'. At first glance their multi-ethnic army created the impression of a hotch-potch of swarthy and emaciated men in blue greatcoats and faded forage caps with tin cockades and the initials 'F' and 'J' for Emperor Franz Joseph. Talking to the wounded prisoners, we were astounded by all the different nationalities the Austrian army contained. There were Czechs, Germans, Italians, Tyroleans, Poles, Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Hungarians, Gypsies, Herzegovinians, Hutsuls, Slovaks . . . I had never even heard of some of these nationalities, even though I had excelled in geography at school.

One day along with a group of wounded Russians an Austrian in grey puttees, as long and thin as a rake, was brought into my tram. He had been wounded in the throat and lay there wheezing and rolling his yellow eyes. As I walked past him, he moved a dirty hand. Thinking he wanted a drink of water, I bent down to his drawn, un-shaven face and heard him whisper in a soft rattling voice. I thought this Austrian had spoken in Russian. Surprised, I drew back. Then, with great difficulty, he repeated himself:

'I'm a Slav . . . Taken captive in a big, big battle . . . my brother.'

He closed his eyes. Apparently, he attached great importance to what he had said, but I didn't understand what that might be. I had the feeling that he had waited for just the right moment to speak these words. I thought about it for a long time afterwards. What had this dying man with the blood-soaked bandage on his throat been trying to tell me? Why hadn't he complained, or asked for a sip of water, or pulled out the metal chain holding the regimental disc engraved with the address of his next of

kin as the other wounded Austrian prisoners did? He seemed to want to say that the world is run by the powerful and it wasn't his fault that he had been forced to take up arms against his brothers. In his fevered mind this idea was connected with the memory of some great, bloody battle to which the 'Swabians' had sent him straight from his village. From that village where the centuries-old nut trees cast large shadows and where a tame Danubian bear danced to a barrel-organ on feast days.

When we started to carry out the wounded at Lefortovo and came to a red-haired soldier from Vologda, he said: 'Take the Austrian. He's in a bad way. We can wait.'

We picked up the Austrian. He was heavy and began moaning softly as we walked. 'Oh-oh-oh, Mother Mary! Oh-oh-oh, Mother Mary!' By the time we reached the hut out in the garden he was dead. The military doctor told us to take him to the morgue. This was a shed with large, wide doors. We carried the Austrian to the morgue, lifted him off the stretcher and laid him down on the hay which had already been flattened by the weight of so many other dead bodies. A yellowish electric bulb hung from the ceiling.

Trying not to look around, I pulled out the identity disc from under his collar. It was a tiny booklet made of two hinged leaves of white oxidised metal with three engraved lines on it: 'Iovann Petrić, 38719, Veseli Dubnjak (Bosnia).' I copied it down.

Later, back at home, I wrote a postcard (for some reason in block letters) telling of Iovann's death and posted it to the Petrić family in Veseli Dubnjak, Bosnia. As I wrote I imagined a low white cottage, so low that the windows were an arm's length off the ground. I saw the dry burdock under the windows and a hawk floating in the hot sky overhead. I saw a woman take a child from her breast and gaze with gloomy eyes down the road where the wind was kicking up dust. Perhaps the wind was blowing from the field where Iovann lay dead and buried, but it couldn't speak and would never tell her anything. And no letters came.

'Taken captive in a big, big battle . . . my brother.' I recalled his rough whisper. Whose fault was it that 'Swabians' in their tight green uniforms had torn him, Iovann, away from his home? He had been obedient and good, Iovann – you could see it in his soft, round eyes, the eyes of a boy on the face of an old man.

It was during those nights at Lefortovo, nights filled with war and suffering when I first contemplated man's tortuous path through life, that I became a man. With every day I shed a bit more of the bright glitter that had coloured my vision of reality. I became aware of life as something fierce and harsh that demanded ceaseless effort to rid it of its grim ichor and delusions and to reveal it in all its magnificence and simplicity.

46

Medical Orderly

In October 1914, I left my job with the Moscow tramway and signed up as a medical orderly on a hospital train operated in the rear by the Union of Cities.[1] I couldn't bear to stay in Moscow any longer. All my thoughts were directed to the west, to the muddy battlefields of Poland where the fate of Russia was being decided. I looked for ways to be closer to the war and finally to escape the despondency of our shattered family.

Almost all the orderlies on these trains were student volunteers. We wore soldiers' uniforms but were allowed to keep our student caps, which saved us many a time from abuse and bullying at the hands of the officers. Each orderly was in charge of a passenger railway carriage set up for forty wounded men. It was a point of honour to keep one's carriage as highly polished as a ship's cabin, so spotlessly clean that when old Dr Pokrovsky, a member of the Imperial Duma, made his regular inspection before the start of a run, he could find nothing to criticise and would be left smiling into his auburn imperial. And this from a man who was strict and mocking.

I was very nervous before my first trip. I didn't know whether I would be able to cope with looking after forty bed-ridden men. There were few nurses on the train. We simple orderlies not only had to wash and feed all the wounded, but also check their temperatures, monitor their dressings and remember when to give them their medicine.

I learned on our first run that the most difficult job was feeding the men. The kitchen was far from my carriage. I had to haul two heavy pails with hot cabbage soup or boiled water through forty-eight doors. The orderlies near the kitchen had to struggle through no more than ten or so doors. Blessed by fate in our eyes, we envied them and took malicious pleasure in spilling soup in their carriages on our many daily trips back and forth through the train. Down on all fours, messy rag in hand wiping up our messes, they would swear at us as we passed by, one after another, with our leaky pails.

At first those forty-eight doors brought me to despair. There were ordinary doors that one pushed or pulled and then there were folding doors that worked like accordions. Every door had to be opened and closed, and to do this one had to set down one's full pails, trying not to spill anything. The train moved fast. It swayed and shook as it went over a set of points, and this is no doubt why to this day I can't stand the sudden jolting that comes with riding on trains. If this wasn't enough, we had to hurry so the soup or tea wouldn't get cold, especially in winter as we scurried over the icy open foot-plates between the carriages, a cutting wind howling and mocking our efforts. All it took was one little slip and you'd end up under the wheels of the train. If one considers that we had to visit the kitchen at least a dozen times a day (for bread and crockery, for tea, for soup, for kasha, and then back to the kitchen with the dirty dishes and empty pails, and so on), it's quite understandable why we cursed the long-dead designer who had considered it wise to put as many as eight doors in each carriage.

We thanked heaven when mealtime coincided with a stop. We would jump out of the cars onto the platform and hurry up and down beside the train on the solid ground with our pails, instead of over the wiggling floors. Many of the wounded couldn't feed themselves, and so we had to do this for them. In the mornings we would bathe them and then wash the floors with a mixture of water and carbolic acid. Only in the evening, after supper, did we get to rest, but not for long for then began the nightly struggle with the candles in their tin lanterns. The candles invariably went out, or melted into a pile, or blazed wildly like torches. The candles over the couplings were always being stolen by one Uncle Vasya, a stumpy brakeman with a big nose whom we dubbed 'Candle Snout'. None of us would have managed all the work if at least one of the more lightly wounded soldiers didn't help out.

But in fact these little troubles weren't the real reason I feared going on that first run. There was another, much larger problem that all of us orderlies secretly dreaded. The real hardship, especially for us, students exempted from military service, was to be face to face with forty maimed men. We feared the scorn and disgust of men who had borne all the burdens and dangers of war while we, young and for the most part healthy men, lived in safety, lacking for nothing. As we got under way on that first run I simply had no time to speak to the wounded or listen to their conversations. Things finally quietened down that night. I sat down behind my partition, lit a cigarette, and looked out of the window. Lanterns

threw shafts of light over the carriages one by one as we raced through some station. And then once more there was nothing but the rhythmic clatter of the wheels and the dark of night, broken here and there by the flickering lights of some forgotten village.

'Orderly!' cried a raspy, demanding voice. 'Orderly!'

I jumped up and set off down the car. I had been summoned by a wounded soldier with a puffy, brown face.

'Hey you, quack, asleep, were you?' he asked calmly, no scorn in his voice. 'You're not supposed to sleep on duty. Give me a drink. Or else I'll lie here suffering with a parched throat all night.'

'Everyone has to sleep,' came a high, childlike voice from the next bed. The man had a scraggy beard and a drawn face and was trying to be conciliatory. 'Some for eternity, some for just a while.'

'What are you, some sort of monk?' the man with the puffy face laughed.

'Ah, fella, they've not even built a monastery yet I'd be willing to join,' he said, smiling. 'I'd need a special sort of monastery, one in keeping with my views on life.'

'Oh, aren't you some special little flower!' another man with a heavily bandaged face said crossly. His weaselly little eyes gleamed in the slits of his white gauze.

'So here we are making fun of each other,' the bearded man said, 'but we have no idea what life is really about. Or what its purpose is.'

'Well, go ahead and tell us, then, don't keep it to yourself,' rudely demanded the man with the puffy face. 'What's the point of it all, how's it all fit together?'

'All right, I will.' He paused. 'There once lived here in our Russian land an old and quite well-known man. His name was Count Tolstoy. He wrote so many books it was said that his right hand began to tingle and go numb. It hurt, his hand did, and so he always went around with it tucked in his belt. I guess this made it feel better, it didn't hurt so much.'

'That's true,' said the man with the bandaged face. 'I've seen it myself in photographs.'

'There's nothing worse than when an arm or leg falls asleep,' corroborated the puffy man. He shifted uncomfortably in his bed to make room for me. 'Have a seat, orderly. I woke you up so you might as well sit with us a while and have a listen.'

'It's wrong to wake a man for no good reason,' came a sleepy voice from deep in the car. 'It sours the blood.'

'Shut up, you! We're talking here!' shouted the puffy man.

'Yes, yes,' the other fellow went on with the story, licking his lips. 'The old man was a bit dried up and his name was Leo. And the name fitted, for it seems, as people tell, he had the strength of a lion. His brain, I mean, of course, his intelligence. His body wasn't anything unusual, he wasn't even tall. Well, so, we had this painter who lived in our village, name of Koler, and once he happened to get into a dispute with this Count Tolstoy. Not so much a dispute, I guess, but more of a conversation. Koler was sitting waiting for a train at some station Lord knows where, just a little way south of Moscow, I think, and he was waiting and waiting. He waited more than an entire day for a train. It was summer, hot and dusty, and the station completely empty, nobody there at all. And then Count Tolstoy showed up and he too sat down to wait for a train.

'Naturally, they asked where the other was heading. Koler said: "As for me, I'm making my way to the south, to Odessa, because I'm sick and tired of painting around here."

'"Why's that?" Tolstoy asked him.

'"Because up here they all paint their houses dark colours, and down there, light ones. And that's much more cheerful. All you need to use down there is plain whitewash – *Kreide*, chalk, they call it in those parts – and as long as it's put on clean and smooth, then that house will sparkle like a gemstone between the sea and the sky. It looks so light and airy you'd think the angels themselves had come down from heaven and painted it."

'"There's no such thing as heaven," said Tolstoy and laughed, in a mean sort of way.

'"Yes, of course, even I know that. I just said it because it sounds nice. And where might you be going, if it's not a secret?"

'"And suppose it is?" Tolstoy asked.

'"If it's a secret, then I beg your pardon. I'm always putting my foot in my mouth."

'The old man embraced him, gave him a warm pat on the back and said: "Now, now, that's obvious. Think nothing of it. You're a true artist, an artist of life, and deep down you know this yourself. Keep on as you've been doing, keep making other people happy. That's the way to live. As for me, I'm searching all over Russia for the quietest possible monastery, a refuge, where I might live in peace and finish my final book without care or bother."

'Koler asked: "And what might this book of yours be about, if you'll excuse my ignorance once more?"

‘“About everything that is good in this world, everything I’ve lived long enough to see,” the old man replied.

‘“That’s a tall order,” Koler said. “Too much to pick from. Take colours – there’s so many good ones, dozens of them. How can you possibly write about all the good things in this world?”

‘“I’ll write as much as I can. I’ll start with an old man who lived in a hut by a river. Every morning he went and stood on his doorstep to watch the yellow buntings bathing in the wet grass. And he thought: ‘Perhaps I should go and pick cowberries in the forest. I’ll pick an entire basketful, or perhaps I shan’t pick any, but shall lie down under a pine tree and take my eternal rest,’ for he was quite old, you see. ‘But none of it matters, it’s all the same either way, whether I live a bit longer here on earth or make way for the young. I’ve lived a long time and have had much joy in my life, so why not let someone take my place and live and love life as I have?’”

‘“No, no!” said Koler. “I don’t understand that kind of talk. Happiness is when chips fly from a man’s chisel, or paint spreads as smooth as a lake from his brush. As for me, the greatest joy comes from work. Your words, Leo Nikolaevich, I find useless.”’

‘That’s right!’ the man with the bandaged face exclaimed. ‘It’s work that makes the world go round. The working man, now he’s the basis of everything. Get your work done, I say, then you can go and stare at the buntings or the dewy grass or whatever you like.’

‘No one ever worked harder than Tolstoy,’ came the sleepy voice from back in the car. ‘I know, I’ve read him.’

‘True!’ shouted the puffy-faced man unexpectedly. ‘Take me, I pick up a clump of earth before planting, I rub it in my hands, I smell it, and then I can tell how the seed will take to the soil – how much moisture it has in it, and whether it’s enough to see this seed through until harvest time.’

‘There’s no need to shout,’ said the same sleepy voice. ‘Maybe that Koler made the whole thing up. House painters are well known to be liars. It’s just too bad that Leo Tolstoy never did finish that book about all the good things in this earth. We’d have read it.’

‘Orderly!’ came the same demanding tone from the puffy face. ‘Open the curtain! The sun’s up. Let me look out of the window and see where we are. I expect we’ll soon be in Kostroma, that’s my home.’

The men stopped talking. I drew back the stiff linen curtain and looked out on the autumn landscape of northern Russia. The misty gold of its birch groves, fields of stubble and nameless meandering rivers stretched all the way to the horizon. The train raced over the tracks, covering the sentry boxes in steam as we hurtled along. Never before had I seen an autumn like this: such bright skies, brittle air, glittering silver cobwebs, ravines overgrown with crimson sorrel, ponds so clear their sandy bottoms caught the sun. Never before had I looked out into the distance and seen such a shimmering haze or such gentle clouds floating motionless in the moist blue sky of morning. I was so absorbed I didn’t immediately notice the weight on my back. The puffy man had put his cast-iron arm on my shoulder and pushed himself up to look out of the window.

‘Oh, let me tell you, brother,’ he said almost as if in song, ‘how I’d love to walk all over this land barefoot and be served tea in every single hut. Except for now there’s one little problem. I’ve got nothing to walk on.’

I turned round and saw through his gown the outline of the tightly bandaged stump of his amputated leg.

As the train sailed over the dewy hills, the engine gave a shout, as if it were the bearer of some long-awaited joyful news.

‘Ah,’ said the puffy man, ‘the faster we go the sooner our wives and mothers will weep. It’d almost be better if we didn’t go home. But that’s no good. Nope, that’s no good either.’

[1] An organisation created in 1914 by private citizens and groups to aid the government in the war effort.

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Russia in Snow

We made a few trips on the train from Moscow to various cities in central Russia – Yaroslavl, Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Samara, Arzamas, Kazan, Simbirsk, Saratov, Tambov, and several others. For some reason I have largely forgotten these cities. I recall much better the little towns we visited, such as Bazarny Syzgan, the isolated villages and one lone peasant hut buried in snow on the edge of a remote settlement. I can't even remember which province that was – maybe Kazan or Tambov or possibly Penza.

I can still see that hut. And a tall old man with a sheepskin coat thrown over his bony shoulders. He had just come out of his low door and stood there holding it open with one hand as he watched our long train with the red crosses painted on its sides go past. The wind was blowing snow down from the roof onto his shaggy head. It was winter. Russia lay buried in snow.

When the train was full of wounded, I was too busy to notice a thing. But on our return trips, with each of us orderlies alone in his scrubbed, empty carriage, we had all the time in the world to look out of the window, read or catch up on our sleep. What I remember of those trips was the impression of never-ending snow, its whiteness flooding the carriage with light, and of a low-hanging pewter sky. A few lines of verse I had once read kept running through my head: 'The silent country, bedecked in white, like the bride in her veil.'[1] I was aware of a strange connection between the snow and the verse and the snow-white caps and gowns of the nurses making their morning rounds up and down the train when it was full.

Bazarny Syzgan. I remember this station because of one minor incident. We stood there all night in the sidings. There was a blizzard. By morning the entire train was covered in snow. I went with an orderly from the next carriage, Nikolasha Rudnev, a good-natured country bumpkin who was a student at the Petrovskaya Agricultural Academy, to buy some rolls in the station buffet. As always after a blizzard the air was sharp and clear. The buffet was empty. Hydrangeas, shrivelled from the cold, stood on a long table covered with an oilcloth. A poster of a mountain goat on a snowy peak in the Caucasus hung by the door. The caption read: 'Drink Saradzhev Cognac'. The buffet smelled of coffee and burnt onions.

A snub-nosed girl wearing an apron over a short, fur-trimmed jacket sat at a small table with a sad expression on her face. She was watching a boy with a sallow face and a long, translucent neck which had been rubbed raw by the collar of his peasant coat. Thin flaxen hair fell over his forehead. The boy sat drinking tea from an earthenware mug, snow melting onto the floor from his worn-out boots beneath the table. He broke off big chunks of rye bread. When he had finished, he gathered up the crumbs from the table and poured them into his mouth.

We bought some rolls, sat down at the table and ordered tea. A samovar gurgled behind the wooden partition. The girl brought us our tea with two withered lemon slices. She nodded at the boy and said: 'I always feed him. Out of my own pocket. He lives off charity. He goes from carriage to carriage every time a train comes in.'

The boy finished his tea, turned over his mug, stood up, turned to the poster advertising Saradzhev cognac and crossed himself. He then lifted his chest, gazed out of the wide station window and began to sing. Apparently, he sang as a way to thank the compassionate girl. He sang in a high, mournful voice, and at the time it seemed to me that his song was the finest expression of the sadness of Russian village life. I remember only a few words:

> . . . and he buried her
> In the damp pine woods,
> Beneath the log of oak,
> Beneath the log of oak . . .

I automatically looked where the boy was staring. A road buried deep in snow ran down into a gully between rows of trees covered with hoar-frost. Beyond the gully and the thatched barn roofs, chimney smoke rose from the huts towards an unassuming grey sky. The boy's eyes were filled with longing, for the things he didn't have, like a simple hut with wide benches around its walls, a broken window

covered over with paper, and the smell of warm rye bread with cinders baked into the crust. I thought of how little it takes to make someone happy when they have nothing, and how much, once we have a little.

Over the years I have often spent time in peasant huts and have come to love them for the dull sheen of their timber walls, the smell of ashes in the stove and their simple austerity, similar to that of fresh water from a spring, a bast basket or the unprepossessing flowers of a potato patch. No one can be fully human without a feeling for their homeland, with all its simple and endearing little details. This feeling is selfless and fills us with a profound interest for everything around us. Alexander Blok wrote during those distant, troubled years:

> Russia, poor Russia,
> Your grey huts,
> Your wind-snatched songs
> Move me like the first tears of love.

Blok was right, of course. Especially with that comparison, for just as there is nothing more human, more emotionally devastating, than tears of love, so is there nothing more loathsome than indifference to one's country, to its past, present and future, to its language, its customs, its fields and forests, to its villages and people, be they geniuses or village cobblers.

It was during my years of service on the hospital train that I first became aware of myself as Russian to my very core. I dissolved, as it were, in that human flood, among soldiers, workers, peasants and craftsmen. This gave me an inner confidence. Not even the war could shake it. 'Great is the God of the Russian land,' Nikolasha Rudnev liked to say. 'Great is the genius of the Russian people! We'll never be anyone's slaves. The future belongs to us!'

I agreed with Rudnev. For me, Russia in those years was embodied by all those soldiers, peasants and villages, so poor in their material possessions, so rich in their grief. I saw so many Russian cities and industrial towns for the first time. They melted into one in my mind and left behind a love for the common, everyday things they all shared. I remember Arzamas with its wicker baskets overflowing with crisp red apples, and its equally red cupolas, so many of them that the town seemed to have been sewn together in red and gold thread by the hands of master artists. Nizhny Novgorod welcomed me with a gust of wind from the Volga which brought with it the smell of sacking. This was the city of Russian enterprise, of warehouses, barrels and crates – Russia's bustling wharf from which goods were shipped far and wide. Then there was Kazan with its snow-dusted statue of Derzhavin.[2] Here, in the opera house, I found myself too tired to stay awake and dozed off in the gallery during a performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Snow Maiden*. All I can remember were a few words that penetrated my sleep: 'Are all the doors really locked to the girls, all the entrances forbidden?'

I woke up in the middle of the night. The night watchman grabbed me and took me to the police station. It smelled of sealing wax. An obese sergeant wrote up a report about my 'sleeping without authorisation in a theatre hall'. I walked back to the train. The wind from the Volga plastered my face with snow, and I felt sorry for Derzhavin, frozen through and staring out into the darkness with his hard bronze eyes.

I was in Simbirsk on another winter night. The deserted town was covered in frost. The trees in the neglected gardens seemed to be made of tinfoil. I looked out towards the Volga from Stary Venets Square, but all I could see was a misty frozen darkness. I didn't know then that Lenin was from Simbirsk. Now, of course, I seem to think that I saw his wooden house. This must be because there are many warm timber houses like this, their windows casting shafts of light on the narrow streets at night. All I knew at the time was that Goncharov had lived in Simbirsk, that plodding man who possessed an almost magical gift for the Russian language. His light, true and vigorous prose lives on in his books.

Saratov struck me as proper and a bit boring. The town exuded an aura of self-important prosperity and strict order. That was the impression I gathered from the main streets in the centre. Then I found the alleys and back streets and Babushka Hill, where little boys were sledging through mounds of puffy dry snow. The boys let me join in. I loved rushing, face down on the toboggan, past the small houses with geraniums glowing in their windows. I actually envied the people who lived in them.

One of the boys took me to have some warm milk in the home of a certain Sofia Tikhonovna, who lived in one of these houses. We were shown into a glassed-in front porch. Pale sunlight, cut into four squares by the windowpanes, lay on the clean floor. In the corner of the warm anteroom stood a bucket of cold water; a wooden jug floated on top. The door opened to a parlour with dark red velvet curtains over the windows. A wall clock with enormous hands ticked so loudly that we had to raise our voices to talk to Sofia Tikhonovna, a quiet old woman. On a little table covered with a lace cloth by the window

lay a thick stack of copies of *The Planted Field* in blue paper covers and a vase of long-dead flowers. Along with some photographs and watercolours there hung on the wall a large, yellowing poster for Maxim Gorky's *Children of the Sun*.

'My son's an actor,' said Sofia Tikhonovna. 'In St Petersburg. He visits me every summer, either on his way to or from Mineralnye Vody.'

I tried to imagine such a life spent in waiting for her son. It must have been hard, but the old woman bore it lightly and without complaint. Every object in the house had been washed, polished and cherished for the sole purpose of possibly being of use to her son for those fleeting seven days out of the long year he came to visit. What if he suddenly looked over at her and asked: 'Mama, where's that brass night lamp?' Or, 'What's happened to the Crimean stone I brought you from Simeiz five years ago?'

And so the brass night lamp had been polished with tooth powder and stood shining in its regular place. And lying on top of the stack of copies of *The Planted Field* was the flat Crimean stone – the very same stone known to half of Russia, with its 'Greetings from Crimea' painted on it in crude colours, along with a cypress tree and an azure sea, a white dot for a sailing boat.

There were a great many towns. Spring came at last with its fragrant, slightly sticky young leaves to gladden the empty provincial wastelands and the dirty streams. That spring we visited Kursk, which seemed to be filled with enormous flowering bushes that reached as high as the eaves. The famous Kursk nightingales sang and then paused, as if to listen to themselves, in the damp woods. The cold and lazy river Tuskar flowed between its low banks overgrown with yellow marsh marigolds. Kursk is a strange town. Many people love it even though they've never been there, mostly because it's the gateway to the south. Looking out of the dusty windows of the Moscow–Sevastopol Express and seeing the houses and churches on the town's hills, the passengers knew that within twenty-four hours they would wake up to the haze of a seaside dawn pink with almond blossoms and would recognise by the brilliance of the horizon that they had arrived.

Spring had come to Russia. We found it in Vladimir, in Klyazma, in Tambov, in Tver – wherever we took the wounded. With every run we noticed that the wounded were more silent. They had become harder and more withdrawn. The entire country itself had fallen silent, as if it were thinking about how to parry the blow that had been struck against it.

Soon our entire unit was transferred to the front. We left on our first trip to the west, to Brest-Litovsk and the battle lines.

[1] Opening lines of an untitled poem by Balmont from his cycle *Southern Cross* (1914).

[2] Gavrila Derzhavin (1743–1816), poet and statesman, born in Kazan.

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Paper Scraps and the Bugler

The front-line hospital train consisted mostly of heated goods wagons. There were only four passenger carriages, and in one of these an operating theatre had been set up. I was assigned to this carriage. From that moment on I was all alone. Only doctors and nurses were allowed into the operating theatre. For days on end I did nothing but rub the white walls with turpentine, scrub the floors, sterilise bandages and gauze in the autoclave and listen to the singing of our 'chemist', who spent his days in his little cubbyhole of a dispensary behind a partition. Romanin was in fact just a student from the Moscow Institute of Trade. He loved to sing all sorts of songs to combat his loneliness in the train dispensary.

His repertoire was extensive. When he was feeling playful, he'd sing:

> How I'd love a young man,
> Parading in a fine white shirt,
> Such a fine white shirt,
> A fancy cane in his hand.

In a melancholy mood, Romanin would sob:

> Oh, my beloved, why did you kiss me so,
> And set my heart ablaze with this terrible glow . . .

Sometimes Dr Pokrovsky would upbraid him for mixing up the medicines and then Romanin would become morose and sing an ominous anarchist anthem:

> Hark to the sound of the signal,
> And the mighty cannons' roll,
> Arise, O brothers, heed the call of Ravachol!

Romanin had a nasty habit of sitting in his dispensary for hour upon hour, hiding from me and refusing to acknowledge my calls from the other side of the partition. It was not surprising then, how I'd jump, startled and swearing, when the silence was suddenly broken by some ridiculous tune sung in his desperate howl:

> He was a bit paunchy,
> Ah, yes, paunchy, paunchy,
> And something of a baldy,
> But did I care?!

To the accompaniment of these songs our empty train crawled over the sodden plains from Moscow to Brest-Litovsk. At night I'd take myself off to bed in a carriage set aside for the orderlies known as the 'staff room'. My bunkmates were Romanin, Nikolasha Rudnev, a decent oaf from the agricultural college in Petrovsk, and a quiet Pole by the name of Hugo Lyakhman. In his little free time, Lyakhman did nothing but polish his boots. The shine was unbearable.

It was quiet at the front, and so we sat for a long time in Brest, a dull town set in the middle of a sorrowful plain. That spring of 1915 was equally sorrowful. Nothing grew here but some dandelions along the paths. The sunlight barely shone through the permanently hazy sky. The war was right next door, but all we could see of it were the throngs of soldiers and low-ranking officers milling about Brest station and the long troop trains crowding the dirty sidings. The air war had as yet not begun. The Germans' big guns could not reach Brest. The fighting was far off, near Keltse.

We were impatient to be sent to the front. We were tired of waiting. It seemed to us as if the wheels of the train had rusted to the rails and the train would never move. Young and excited, we had forgotten that staying in Brest meant that soldiers weren't being wounded in battle, that there was a lack of injured

and maimed men. Only Romanin thought of this, and he would say to us: 'You've come to the front acting as if it's a night out at the theatre. Stamping your feet in a hurry for the curtain to go up. You fools!'

It was always quiet for a few minutes in the staff room after Romanin's outbursts, but then the arguments broke out again – typical Russian student arguments. They were loud, endless and always well meant, even if we held wildly divergent views. Mostly we argued about Germany and the monstrous stupidity and impudence of the Prussian militarists. Kaiser Wilhelm II's spiky waxed moustache, the fantasy of all martinets and pimps, served as the symbol of Germany in those days. It seemed impossible to believe that this was the Germany of Schiller and Goethe, Richard Wagner and the young and, at the time, beautiful writer Heinrich Mann.

Finally, the day came. Our train slowly began to move. I leapt from the train and raced down the platform to the operating carriage; once we were in motion, it wasn't possible to go from one to the other. I hopped up, opened the door and sat down on the rear platform, my legs dangling over the side. I sat like that for several hours, my eyes searching the fields and villages of Poland for traces of war as we rolled along. But there weren't any. We rode past villages where the bindweed clung to the fences upon which the locals had placed their clay pitchers, upside down, to dry, just as it was done back home in Ukraine. Arrogant storks looked out from their enormous nests on top of the peasant huts. The air was soft and the colour of pale gold, like the hair of the young children who waved excitedly at the passing train.

Just as soft and golden was the face of a Polish girl carrying two buckets of water on her yoke. She stopped to set the buckets on the ground, shielded her eyes with her hand and watched for a long time as the carriages slowly rumbled by. Then, she brushed a strand of hair from her face and picked up her buckets. Tall black crucifixes stood at the crossroads. Old women with their knitting sat beside them, and tethered goats grazed on the grass. Candles burned in a small chapel, but I could not make out anyone inside. And still the same soft golden colour of the fields and the same streams, sluggishly flowing over pale, golden sandy bottoms.

'Where's the war?' I asked myself. Our train passed by the fortress at Ivangorod. Far beyond the Vistula we could see its green earthworks and the tall stumps of ancient black poplars felled during the siege.

And then suddenly I saw it: hurriedly dug trenches filled with water stretched in rows across the swampy lowlands from the railway tracks all the way to the horizon. Our train was moving along a high dike. The engine let out a whistle, the brakes screeched and we stopped: for some reason the bridge across the Vistula was closed. In the silence which followed we could hear a bugler blowing some kind of signal from inside the fortress. Orderlies began jumping out of the train.

'We're gonna be here for a good hour,' Romanin yelled to me. 'Come on!'

We ran down the steep bank and then walked along the trenches. I began to catch sight of paper scraps and crumpled tin cans lying everywhere in the grass, which had apparently sprouted after the battle. The tins had been opened in a hurry, perhaps with a bayonet. Their jagged edges had rust on them; it looked like blood.

I didn't understand how so much paper could end up on a battlefield. There were scraps of letters, newspapers, postcards, books, documents and faded, sweat-stained photographs. Soldiers' caps had been trampled into the mud. An Austrian cap, its peak torn off, dangled from a burnt bush. Rags of coarse cotton soldiers' underwear fluttered in the wind on a twisted barbed-wire entanglement, as if they had purposely been hung up there to dry. Barbed wire lay about in piles of rust.

'It looks as if water isn't the only thing that can rust iron,' mumbled Romanin.

'What else?'

'Blood,' he replied, reluctantly.

All around lay soldiers' boots, buttons, cartridges, steel clips, torn packets of Ira cigarettes, grey machine-gun straps, red silk ribbons, nails, soaked tobacco pouches embossed with crosses, little icons, belts, the soles of boots, wrapping paper, dirty bandages tied up with string, Austrian dagger-bayonets, smashed wooden spoons, steel shell casings, bullet-riddled canteens, broken glass. This was the rubbish of war – everything a man leaves behind on the field of death, everything that he had cherished while alive and then tossed away, abandoned to the sun, wind and rain. I thought to myself that grown men had fought and died here, but each one of them had treated his soldier's property, which he had carried and feared to part with, like a child. Near a shell hole lay a dead horse, its bones picked clean by carrion crows, its long yellow teeth exposed as if in a laugh. The water at the bottom of the hole was black with fat tadpoles as round as rubber balls.

It was very quiet. Nothing but the sound of field mice rustling in the rubbish. And then, from behind the fortress walls, the bugler sounded his mournful notes once again. That sound brought to mind my

childhood notion of war as something magnificent. The sound of the bugle held all the glorious lies about war that I, and many others, had been brought up on since my earliest years: the flutter of the banners, the singing of trumpets, charging hoof beats, bullets whistling through the air, the glitter of swords, the steely bristling of bayonets, the exhilarating sense of danger. I still knew by heart the splendid verses first learned as a little boy of *Le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*.

Father had three thick volumes of Gnedich's *History of Art*.[1] I loved to look at the pictures by Matejko, Willewalde, Meissonier, Gros – all those paintings of the battles of Eylau and Fère-Champenoise, of hussars' attacks, the uhlans' lances, neat round puffs of cannon smoke, and of generals with brass field glasses in their hands, their maps spread out before them on a drum.[2] Of course, I knew war was nothing like these paintings. But these images of the splendour of war nevertheless stuck in my mind and refused to let go. What I saw now was not war itself, only its aftermath, its dirt, its stench, its refuse. It was not what I had expected. But I kept quiet and said nothing to Romanin.

The engine whistled and let out two puffs of steam along the tracks. It was time to go back. We walked in silence to the train. On the platform Romanin gave me a sideways glance and said: 'You've got to get used to it, little fellow. This is nothing.'

I lost my temper and swore at Romanin. It was the one and only time during our wartime friendship that I ever did.

[1] Pëtr Gnedich, author of *The History of Art from Ancient Times* (1885).

[2] Painters known for their works on military themes: Jan Matejko (1838–93), Bogdan Willewalde (1819–1903), Ernst Meissonier (1815–91) and Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835).

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Rain in the Carpathian Foothills

We were on our way from Brest to Keltse, but it looked as if we'd never make it to this distant Polish town. We were forever being held up. For more than a week we remained stuck at the junction near Skarzhisko. In those days many of these junctions, built at the intersection of several rail lines far from any human settlement, were quite astonishing places. A large station with a restaurant, bright incandescent lights, dozens of lines, a smoky depot, small wooden shacks for the railway workers set amid a stand of acacias and beyond these – nothing but empty fields. Crows spun in the windy air, and no matter what direction you looked, there was nothing – no hut, no chimney smoke, only the straight, dusty track of the high road stretching to the edge of the earth.

This is how it was at Skarzhisko. A hundred paces from the main station, the larks trilled in the sky and a narrow road vanished into the swaying fields of grain. An enormous unfinished stone church stood in a field not far from the station. Whoever would have thought to build such a thing in this deserted spot? Who needed a church out here? No one could say. Swifts darted between the roofless walls. A flight of stone steps, its railing gone and now covered in grass which swayed softly in the wind, led up to a gallery. After tidying up the operating carriage, I would take a book by Tagore and walk over to the church. I liked to read sitting on an unfinished wall that faced the fields. Sometimes my mind would wander and I would forget what I was reading, but this was no less enjoyable.

The children of the Polish railway workers liked to follow me in single file into the church. The dogs followed them, and soon the church became a playground. The children were quiet, almost timid, with very attentive eyes, in whose depths a trusting smile always seemed to be on the verge of breaking out. I tried to speak to them in Polish, but they just looked at each other with an awkward expression: none of them could understand me. I was speaking a horrible mix of Polish-Russian-Ukrainian that passed for Polish back in Kiev.

After a while Romanin, Nikolasha Rudnev and Yelena Petrovna Sveshnikova, one of the nurses, came with me to the church. Everyone called her simply Lëlya. She was a headstrong girl with something of a husky voice and a pale face. She looked as though she was trying to hide some inner turmoil. We had become friends while still working on a train in the rear. One night during her rounds she found me asleep on duty, and while trying to wake me up accidentally dripped hot candle wax on my face.

I jumped to my feet, blinded by pain. Lëlya bandaged me up, one moment crying from shame and fear and the next laughing at her own stupidity and my pathetic appearance. Once Lëlya sneaked up behind me in the church, ripped Tagore from my hands, and flung the book as far as she could. It flew through the air, its pages flap-ping, and landed in the grass. I turned and was met by Lëlya's eyes, black with anger.

'You've had plenty enough of your dusty old philosophy!' she said.

I sat there not saying a word. Neither did Lëlya. Then she asked: 'What's that off in the distance?'

'The peaks of the Carpathians.'

'Are you angry with me?' she asked. 'If so, I'll go and find your book.'

'No, don't bother.'

'Fine then! Let's go and have a look at the bridge.'

We set off for the railway bridge, which crossed a small stream whose banks were overgrown with brambles. We stood by the bridge for a long time, looking at the Carpathians, which were piled up along the horizon like storm clouds. A sentry came by, stopped and also looked off into the distance.

'However much we try,' he eventually said, 'it's hard for fellows like us to get used to foreign lands. Even the rain here is different. The grass looks like grass, but it's not like ours.'

'Is that bad?' asked Lëlya.

'No, it's not bad, miss,' the soldier said, mildly annoyed. 'Sure the great expanse is nice, but there's something cold about it too. Like the strange feeling you get waking up from a nap.'

Lëlya laughed. The soldier sighed and walked off. 'You can't stand here,' he said in an uncertain voice as he went. 'Even if you are one of us, no one is allowed to be here.'

Lëlya was to be the cause of one of the greatest humiliations in my life.

I was sent once from Brest to Moscow to pick up some medical supplies. All the doctors, nurses and orderlies asked me to run errands for them and gave me letters and notes to deliver; at the time everyone tried not to use the postal system in order to avoid the military censorship. Lëlya entrusted me with her gold wristwatch and asked me to give it to her uncle, a professor in Moscow. The fancy gold watch embarrassed her; it was, of course, utterly out of place in a hospital train. She also gave me a letter for him, filled with compliments about me and asking her uncle to take me in if I needed a place to stay.

I made my way to the professor's door in Moscow and rang the bell. No one opened for a long time. Finally, a peevish female voice from inside asked who it was and what I wanted. A cross-eyed old maid opened the door. Towering behind her stood a tall old lady, as imposing and majestic as a monument, in a white starched blouse and black bow-tie. Her silver hair had been piled up in a haughty swirl and it glistened like the glass in her pince-nez. This was the professor's wife. She stood guarding the door to the dining room, where the family were drinking their morning coffee. I could hear the sound of clinking spoons. I gave her the box with the watch and the letter.

'Wait here,' she said and went into the dining room, but not before giving the maid a knowing glance. She immediately began pretending to dust the front-hall table, which, by the looks of it, had already been polished to a glossy sheen earlier that morning.

'Who rang?' came a raspy old voice from the dining room. 'What do they want?'

'Imagine,' she said, rustling a piece of paper (she had apparently opened Lëlya's letter), 'off at the front in the middle of a war but Lëlya's still as featherbrained as always. She sent her gold watch. With some soldier, no less. How could she be so careless? Just like her mother!'

'Mmmmm,' mumbled the professor, his mouth full of food. 'She's lucky he didn't keep it.'

'Really, I don't understand her at all,' she went on. 'She writes here that she'd like us to take him in. Where are we supposed to put him? We don't have any room. As it is Pasha has to sleep in the kitchen.'

'That's all we need,' groaned the professor. 'Give him a rouble and see him out. Lëlya ought to know by know how I hate strangers in the house.'

'Seems too little, one rouble,' she said doubtfully. 'What do you think, Pëtr Petrovich?'

'All right, then two roubles.'

I opened the front door, exited onto the landing and then slammed the door behind me so hard that something inside the professor's flat fell and crashed to the floor with a loud bang. I froze. Immediately, the door flew open. Behind the maid, who had made certain to keep the chain on the door, stood the entire family: the professor's haughty wife, her horse-faced student son and the old professor. A napkin covered with yellow egg stains hung from the collar of his shirt.

'What is the meaning of this outrage?' screamed the maid. 'It's disgraceful! And from a soldier sent to the front to defend the Fatherland, no less!'

'Tell your masters', I said, 'that they are swine.'

With that there was a scuffle in the vestibule. The student lunged at the door and tried to undo the chain, but his mother pulled him back.

'Leave him be, Genya!' she shouted. 'He'll kill you. These soldiers from the front are used to killing.'

The old professor pushed himself forward. His clean little beard quivered with indignation. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted through the chink in the door: 'Hooligan! I'll turn you over to the police!'

'Oh, you,' I said. 'The shining light of science.'

His wife yanked the old man back and then slammed the door.

Ever since I've had a life-long distrust of those so-called 'high-priests of learning', that tribe of pseudo-scholars who are so proud of their erudition yet remain forever nothing but vulgar philistines. There are more forms of vulgarity than we can register. Even such an unerring expert on vulgarity as Chekhov never could have described all its manifestations. How I loathe those academic families with their ridiculous, sanctified family ways, with their inflated sense of decorum, their arrogant politeness, their venerable pedant- fathers, pompously opining on the number of hairs on a worm, their smooth grammatical speech, their prim, prudish wives and their secret balance sheets recording the successes and failures of their rivals! And those professors' flats with their disciplined servants and their unbearable tedium – tried and tested and never to be changed until death itself.

I didn't tell Lëlya about this incident. We loved to talk, argue and spend our evenings in a little café, where we drank coffee, ate homemade pastries and watched the old proprietress embroider red flowers on a linen tablecloth. Once more, there was nothing to remind us of the war. If it weren't for the sentry by the bridge, we might have thought we were on holiday deep in the Polish countryside. And any thoughts of war seemed utterly incongruous with Lëlya's virginal pallor and Tagore's teachings on cleansing the human soul of evil. Quiet sunsets faded over the fields and the far-off peaks of the

Carpathians. Our days, filled with meditation and happiness, ended in their smouldering depths. Boys and girls like us were more prone to introspection than adults back then, and were, of course, much happier, even in wartime.

One evening the sun set in a leaden mist. That night rain drummed on the carriage roofs, and in the morning we left Skarzhisko for Keltse. The foothills of the Carpathians suddenly drew close. A damp air from the beech forests blew in through the train's windows. Clouds drifted over the hilltops, now hiding, now revealing the roadside crucifixes. Suddenly, a heavy cannon shot rumbled lazily through the mist. The train seemed to slow down. There was a second shot, then a third, and then nothing but silence.

'Romanin!' I called through the partition. 'Did you hear that?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'And I'm surprised.'

'Why?'

'Come here and I'll tell you.'

I went into the dispensary. I loved its cramped and cosy tidiness. It smelled of dried raspberries. Romanin was weighing out powders on his little scales with their mother-of-pearl pans.

'Have a seat,' he said. 'Go ahead and smoke if you want. I'm going to. I have to admit I don't even know why I'm surprised.'

'Really? Don't you?'

'Let's leave it. Probably not even worth trying to make sense of. Here, have a look around. Everything sparkles, everything is in its place. Every phial is in its little wooden holder. Cosy, right? I sit here all day, even when there's nothing to do. I read, look out of the window. Sometimes I sleep here in my chair.'

He ran his eyes over the rows of porcelain phials and sighed. 'One stray shell and all of this would be blown straight to hell. This is what surprises me. The closer we come to danger, the more we love these things – fragile phials, practically made out of air, books, cleanliness, peace and quiet, cigarettes.'

'We're not going to be hit by a shell! It's not going to happen,' I said.

Black sidings running this way and that sped past us outside the window. We were approaching Keltse. A soft rain drizzled through the shell holes in the station warehouses. We waited three days in Keltse for the wounded to arrive. The head doctor allowed Lëlya, Romanin and me to visit the village of Khentsiny near the front. An artillery unit was stationed at Khentsiny. Lëlya's cousin served in it. We started late in the morning in a two-wheeled ambulance cart. It was still raining. Acrid smoke from the locomotives clung to the city. On the outskirts, red water pooled in the bottom of deep pits where they dug for clay; rust-coloured bubbles rose and then popped upon the surface. We passed a bombed-out brick factory. Women and children with empty sacks were rummaging about and looking for something amid the piles of broken bricks. We came out onto the main road leading to the front. It looked like a shallow river of mud.

Soldiers were trudging through the fields on either side of the road. Pulling up the wet skirts of their greatcoats with one hand, with the other they dragged spools of barbed wire affixed to wooden poles. A primitive ambulance had lost a wheel and been abandoned in a ditch by the roadside. Soldiers crowded around it and took turns crawling inside to smoke, sheltered from the rain. Each patiently waited his turn, his wet fingers rolling a cigarette made from cheap tobacco and damp newsprint. Then he climbed into the ambulance, lit up and, with a look of pleasure spreading across his face, took a deep draw of the harsh smoke. They stood hunched over, their hands pulled up inside the sleeves of their coats; every so often one of them would spit as he looked to the west. A raw, gusty wind blew from that direction, lashing the branches of the bushes and driving the clouds.

'Nice spot for a smoke,' our dark little driver said scornfully, his face hidden by the upturned collar of his greatcoat. 'Amazing what a man will do for tobacco.'

'What's wrong with it?' asked Romanin. 'It's out of the rain.'

'The Germans are always shelling this bit of road,' the soldier answered. 'Every hour they send over two or three shells. As a warning. It's like clockwork for them. The Germans fight according to their watches, don't you know. So I keep an eye out and make sure to slip past right after one of their shells hits.'

'Does that work?'

'Depends,' he replied, calmly. 'Most of the time. But it doesn't pay to try it every day. You've got to have some luck.'

Suddenly, the soldiers by the ambulance began to move. Some quickly squatted on their heels, others dashed towards a small depression by the side of the road. The smokers didn't bother to climb out of the ambulance and went on puffing away, burning their fingers, and spitting.

'Those German gunners have finished their cigarettes!' the driver yelled in a mocking tone to the

soldiers. ‘Just maybe they’ll let you finish yours! Good luck to you!’

Just then something flashed and screeched overhead, followed by a loud explosion. Not far from the ambulance a fountain of yellow mud erupted from the ground.

‘Get on with you!’ the driver yelled at the horses. ‘Damn! Good for nothing but sausage, you are!’

But the horses kept on at their slow pace. A second shell exploded behind us by the roadside. For the first time in my life I heard the whizz of flying shrapnel. A young volunteer, practically a boy, ran up to our cart. His face was smooth and pale, as if he had just arrived at the front. By the look of him, it was obvious he was the sheltered city child of some educated family. He grabbed the back of the wagon and asked in a hesitant but very polite voice: ‘Could you tell me, please, whether they will stop firing any time soon?’

Taken aback by this surprising question, the driver groaned and stopped the horses. ‘Why don’t you ask ’em, ask those Germans, really nicely,’ he said, an icy sneer on his lips. ‘Get down on your knees. You’re an educated fellow. Maybe for you they’ll do this favour. Oh, all right! I can see it’s your first time. Climb in. But just don’t get your muddy boots on the hay. That’s not what it’s there for, got it?’

The boy hurriedly climbed in and, turning his head stiffly, as if it had been bolted on, gave us an apologetic look. A third shell landed behind us, a bit farther away than the previous one.

‘Well, that ought to do it!’ said the driver. ‘Now you can have a smoke. The Germans have finished their work and are now onto their coffee break.’

The soldiers were milling around the ambulance again. But they weren’t so calm now. We could hear them arguing. ‘What do you think you’re doing lighting up another one? Taking advantage of the shelling, are you, mangy dog? Climb out before we throw you out!’ ‘Don’t touch me, you ape! We’ve handled bigger than the likes of you!’ ‘Made a real home for themselves in there, just like a bunch of broody hens. The Germans certainly lent them a hand.’ ‘All right, all right, we’re coming out. Stop your barking. Get in.’

We drove on. Maybe it was because the danger had just passed, but the rain seemed warmer and the fields smelled of wet grass. A clear bright patch of sky showed on the horizon. The road ran between tall poplars. We had entered the foothills of the Carpathians. The rain clung to the hills like matted strings of oakum. Clear streams of rainwater rushed through the stone ditches on the roadside. The gravel glistened. Steam rose off the horses’ backs. Far off through the bluish haze of the clouds and rain we caught sight of a hillside town as small as a child’s toy. The sound of the town’s church bells floated on the wind.

‘That’s Khentsiny,’ said the driver. ‘Where do you want to go – the searchlight regiment or the artillery?’

‘Artillery.’

Our cart stopped in front of a two-storey house. There were no windows on the front, only a narrow door and over it a black crucifix. The crucified Christ pursued us the entire time we were in Poland. Some of the crucifixes had been made with such anatomical precision, down to the clots of blood oozing out of the emaciated Jesus’s pierced side, that they were truly repugnant. Romanin liked to say that he had had enough of all these corpses hanging at the crossroads. He wanted to go home, back to the Ural Mountains, where for hundreds of versts around there was nothing but the wooded slopes, the river Sakmara, full of pike, and his father’s beehives. Romanin’s father, a retired village doctor, was living out his days in a small country place on the Sakmara.

The artillery officers welcomed us. They gave us tea and let us lie down on their camp beds. We were soaked through. Soon we were drowsy from the tea and the warmth of the room. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

The roar of cannon fire woke me in the middle of the night. An artillery duel was going on around us. In the next room a candle flickered, and the officers were quarrelling in hushed voices around a table. They had taken off their tunics and were playing cards in their shirtsleeves. With each explosion the glass rattled in the windows and the church bell clanged over our heads. Rain was pouring down. A frighteningly black night loomed outside the windows. I lit a cigarette. Romanin shuffled in his bed.

‘Yes, indeed,’ he said to no one, ‘rivers of blood and all of it the fault of rogues and idiots.’

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘Id-i-ots!’ Romanin repeated, emphasising each syllable. ‘All those pompous Wilhelms and idiotic Nicholases. And those greedy businessmen. Half of them are cretins, the others reactionary scoundrels. But knowing all this doesn’t help us in the least.’

‘Listen,’ said Lëlya softly. She couldn’t sleep either. ‘Stop it or I’ll just burst . . .’

We were silent. The rain kept coming down. I was hungry, but morning was still a long way off. I began to doze off, and through my half-sleep I saw Lëlya get up and go over to the window. She stood

staring for a long time at the darkness where from time to time something flashed, and then she sighed, straightened my greatcoat, which was slipping off of me, and sat down on a stool next to her bed, where she remained for a long time, as still as death, her hands clenched between her knees.

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Beyond the Muddy San

The molten ball of the sun was sinking into a sparse pine forest on the far side of the river San. Scattered among the stumps and bushes stood single pine trees – tall and thin, bent under the weight of their crowns. The sun's crimson flame caressed the trunks, spread out over the sand around their roots, and reflected off the fast, rippling waters of the San. Bluish in the evening fog, a plain stretched out beyond the forest's edge. The air had the bitter-almond smell of marsh flowers.

This was Galicia. Our train had been held up at the frontier post next to a wooden bridge over the San. Troop trains were coming from the opposite direction. I was leaving the country for the first time. On the far side of the San lay Austria. I felt as if everything on the other side of the frontier must be different from life at home – and not only the people, villages and cities, but even the sky and the trees. That's how I had imagined the world outside Russia as a child, and this stupid notion had somehow remained with me all these years. But for now everything looked just as it did at home. The same dry chicory grew along the paths. My feet still sank into the sand just like in Russia, and even the water in the San was muddy despite my expecting it to flow in a clear, gurgling torrent.

We crossed the bridge over the San during the night and arrived in Galicia. We stopped at the small town of Melets in the morning. I had no time to explore it. There was fighting up ahead near Dembitsa, and we were sent on immediately. All I managed to see from my window were pleasant green hills, tiled roofs, walls covered with hops and roads, white as chalk and lined with poplars. Soon we heard heavy, continuous artillery fire and saw dark clouds of dust stretching across the entire southern horizon. It may not have been dust, but the smoke of burning villages.

Wagons filled with refugees trotted past our train, heading north to cross the San. Ragged groups of worn-out infantrymen straggled by. The ground shook and rolled. The glass in the carriage windows rattled. The train eventually stopped in a large clearing. Yellowish clouds of shrapnel exploded here and there on the surrounding leafy slopes. The cavalry galloped past. A field battery concealed in some nearby undergrowth fired with deafening intensity. Dr Pokrovsky ordered us to raise two Red Cross flags on top of the train.

We were moved forward a little way towards a bombed-out crossing keeper's hut. Beside it on the dirty grass lay dozens of injured men in makeshift bandages. We immediately began loading the wounded onto the train. Soon the carriages were full, but the wounded kept coming. We laid them down in the corridors, in the vestibules, in the staff room. Their low, painful groans echoed throughout the entire train. The fighting was getting closer, but we couldn't see it. All I noticed was a shattered window on the train and the occasional piercing ring of bullets bouncing off the rails. One of our orderlies was wounded in the shoulder. Romanin was knocked to the ground by a heavy blast. We barely noticed any of this since we were all consumed by one thought, namely getting the wounded aboard as fast as possible.

A sweaty officer rode up to the train and shouted for Pokrovsky. His epaulettes were so covered in dust you couldn't even tell his rank. 'Hurry up!' he yelled, straining to be heard over the noise. 'Get this bloody train out of here. In fifteen minutes it'll be too late. You've got a double load. Get moving!' Shaking a whip in his hand, the officer pointed to the north, while his horse spun in circles as if possessed.

'We can take more wounded up on the roof,' Pokrovsky shouted back.

'Load them on as you're heading out,' he yelled, and then jerked his horse and galloped towards the engine. Just then the train moved. A few more wounded managed to grab hold of the handrails and the orderlies pulled them onto the platforms.

Only now did I notice it was getting dark. The flashing explosions had become clearer and the dust cloud on the horizon had turned an ominous crimson colour. For several minutes we could hear the sound of bullets ricocheting off the train. Soon we were going very fast. Once we finally slowed down we realised that we had barely escaped from the 'pocket'.

The train was carrying several hundred wounded men, their field dressings soaked with blood and falling off, their faces darkened by thirst. All the bandages had to be changed. We had to find the most seriously wounded among them who required immediate surgery. We set to work at once, and from that

moment on, time stood still. We had ceased to notice it. Every fifteen minutes I swabbed the blood off the linoleum floor of the operating room, threw away the crusted bandages, and was then called to the operating table, where, not fully realising what I was doing, I held a wounded man's leg, trying not to look, as Pokrovsky cut through the sugar-white bone with his hard steel saw. In an instant the leg became heavy in my hand and I became dimly aware through the fog in my head that the operation was over, and then I carried the severed leg to a zinc chest, to be buried later at the next stop.

Everything smelled of blood, essence of valerian and burning alcohol. The instruments were constantly being boiled on spirit lamps. Ever since, the bluish flame of a spirit lamp has reminded me of unbearable pain covering men's faces with a deathly, grey sweat.

Some of the wounded screamed, others gritted their teeth and cursed. And then there was one man whose fortitude amazed even the imperturbable Pokrovsky. His pelvis had been shattered, and the pain must have been beyond description, yet somehow he managed to walk to the operating room by himself, holding onto the walls as he went. All he asked for while his wound was being dressed was permission to smoke to help 'take the edge off'. Not once did he let out a moan or a cry; instead he tried to reassure Pokrovsky and Lëlya, who was helping the doctor pick out the shrapnel fragments and apply a complicated bandage.

'It's nothing!' he was saying. 'I can handle it. Not bad at all. Don't you worry.'

His eyes alone gave away the pain. They twitched and dimmed with each passing minute behind a yellowish film.

'We've never seen a braver warrior than you. Where're you from?' Pokrovsky asked gruffly.

'My people are from Vologda, Your Excellency,' the man replied. 'My mother birthed me in a dark wood. All alone she was. She washed me clean in a puddle. We're all like this back there, Your Excellency. 'Course a wounded animal will scream, but it ain't right for a human being.'

I no longer remember how long it took for these endless operations and dressings. During especially complicated operations, the train would stop at a station. All I recall is that I was either switching on the bright electric lights (the carriage had its own generator) or switching them off, I assume because the sun was shining. But it never seemed to shine for long, an hour or so, before it was time for me to switch the blindingly bright lights back on again. Once Pokrovsky took me by the arm, led me to the window and forced me to drink a glass of some thick brown liquid.

'Be strong,' he said. 'It's almost over. I can't spare a single one of you.'

And I stayed strong and stuck it out, stopping only to change my blood-soaked smock from time to time. The wounded kept coming and coming. By now we could no longer tell them apart. They all seemed to have the same unshaven, greenish faces, and the same eyes, white and bulging with pain, the same rapid, helpless breathing, and the same prehensile steel fingers, which they jabbed into our arms when we tried to hold them down during surgery. All of our arms were covered with scratches and bruises. I left the train only once at some anonymous Polish station for a cigarette. It was evening and it had just stopped raining. Puddles glittered on the platform. Like a giant bunch of grapes, a storm cloud, tinged pink by the afterglow of the setting sun, hung in a greenish sky. A crowd of women and children had gathered around the train. The women were wiping their eyes with the edges of their kerchiefs. 'Why are they crying?' I wondered, confused, until I heard the faint moans coming from the carriages.

The entire train was ceaselessly, wearily moaning. No mother's heart could hold out against this muted cry for help and pity without bursting into tears. Every wounded man became a child again, and it is no surprise that during their fevered nights and amid their agonising pain they called for their mothers. Their mothers weren't there, however, and no one could replace them, not even the most selfless nurses. Compassion flowed from these women's warm and gentle hands as they lovingly touched the men's torn flesh, their rotting wounds, their matted hair.

I don't recall how many days and nights we travelled before reaching Lublin one morning at dawn. Three empty hospital trains were waiting for us there. They took our wounded and left with them for Russia, while we remained in Lublin. We were given three days' leave.

I walked along the tracks to the station pump and washed myself for a long time under the spout's heavy, foaming stream. It was a long shower because I kept dozing off. Fleeting dreams of the smell of water and Marseilles soap filled my head. I changed my clothes and went out. In front of the station stood a tall row of lilacs. And there were flowers whose names I didn't know; they reminded me of girls in calico dresses of violet and white. I sat down on a wooden bench, leaned back and began to drift off while gazing at the town. It stood before me on a small green hill, surrounded by fields and bathed in morning light. The sun sparkled in a pure blue sky. I could hear the sound of the town's silver church bells. It was Good Friday. I fell asleep. The sun beat down on me, but I didn't notice a thing.

A little old man in a stiff collar yellow with age had sat down on the bench next to me. He opened his

umbrella and held it over me to shield my eyes from the sun. I don't know how long he had been sitting there before I awoke. By then, the sun was already quite high in the sky. The kind old man stood up, tipped his bowler, said '*Przepraszam*' – 'Excuse me' – and left.

Who was he? A retired schoolmaster or railway booking clerk? A church organist? Whoever he was, I have remained grateful to him for not forgetting the claims of ordinary human kindness in wartime. He appeared like some benevolent ancient ghost out of the shady streets of Lublin, the same streets that were home to retired civil servants, living out their poor and tidy lives, and where a man might find his last bit of remaining joy in a bed of scarlet geraniums blooming along a wooden fence or in a box of cigarettes smelling of fragrant Crimean tobacco. This was all that was left to him. His children had grown up and moved away, his wife had died long ago, and the old copies of *The Planted Field* and *Illustrated Quarterly* on the shelf had been read and reread several times over. Everything had passed on. All that remained was silent wisdom, the trail of smoke from a cigarette, and the distant, unchanging sound of church bells ringing on feast days and for funerals.

51

Spring on the Vepsh

Silence is especially precious in wartime.

Lublin was full of silence. The noisy war hurried by, just like the troop trains which raced through, barely pausing at the station. Lublin station was thick with tobacco smoke, it clanged with mess tins, and echoed with the sound of tramping boots and the rattle of rifles. But if you just walked a little way up the main street into town, you found yourself enveloped in silence and the smell of lilacs. You could take off your cap, rub the red mark it had left on your forehead, take a deep breath and say to yourself: 'What kind of crazy nonsense is this! There's no war on, and I doubt there ever was!'

You could look up and see swifts darting over the rooftops. Thin clouds drifted from one distant blue horizon to another without depriving the earth of a single ray of sun. The sunshine filtered through the heart-shaped leaves of the lilac trees and touched the paving stones with a bit of their springtime warmth. In the Saxon Garden a brass band rehearsed a few opera selections. The music carried far in the silence that hung over the city. In a side street down by the river, between the kitchen gardens and some narrow gates, came the sound of a familiar melody: 'He's far away, your young groom, far away in some foreign land . . .' Wrought-iron lanterns hung over the gates. Lilacs crowded against the railing. The silver church bells rang all day long from morning until night.

We were in Lublin for Easter. Feast days took the place of the commotion and dust of the recent battle. Nevertheless, we were still finding in our now scrubbed and tidy train a wad of blood-stained gauze behind a brake handle or a cigarette butt chewed to pulp by some poor man in pain overlooked in the corner of one of the carriages.

We went to the midnight service in the Bernadine Church. It was all very theatrical: the altar boys in their lace, the mounds of lilacs piled before the wooden statue of the Infant Jesus draped in blue brocade, the grey-haired priests, the nasal drone of the Latin chants, the thunderous peals of the organ.

The eyes of the praying women spoke of only one thing – their fervent expectation of a miracle, their enormous hope that just maybe this infant or that pale woman with the thick eyelashes, the mother of this little child, would banish war, endless toil and poverty from this world, so that they could straighten up at last from their washtubs and smile at the sun playing upon the soapy water.

Religion was their self-deception. It was a world of fruitless make-believe for weary people. They could see no other way out of their troubles and so despite common sense and their own life experiences they believed with a burning fanaticism that justice was incarnate in the person of this poor soul from Galilee, in the person of God. But for some reason this God, invented by people in order to make sense of the bloody and harsh muddle of human existence, never came, or spoke, or helped in their lives. Yet they still believed in him, even though their God's inaction had lasted for centuries. So great was their longing for happiness that they looked for its poetry in religion, in the sobs of the organ, in the smoke of incense, in solemn incantations.

On the first day of Easter Lëlya, Romanin and I walked far out of town to the banks of the river Vepsh. Its clear water flowed between fields of wheat. In the depths of the water the reeds looked like black walls. Small marsh birds fluttered about above the grasses along the banks. It was pleasant to walk along this firm road through the fields in a foreign land with no idea where it was leading us. Wild flowers waved on either side, and we watched snowy mountain ranges of clouds form in the deep sky overhead. And no one – not then on the Vepsh, not later in life – has ever been able to explain to me why sudden waves of happiness come to us at moments when nothing out of the ordinary has just happened. I was truly happy that day.

We came upon a hut with a thatched roof by the Vepsh. A fishing net hung on the fence. Brown reed warblers were busy picking at the dry weeds caught in the net. We startled the birds, and the flapping of their wings woke a baby asleep in a wicker basket below the window. The baby began to cry. A peasant woman in a striped skirt came out of the hut. Upon seeing us, she stopped, her hands pressed to her chest. An old dog dragged itself out from under a broken tub, walked to the basket and peered inside with a look of surprise. Convinced everything was in order, it yawned, sat down and began scratching at its fleas, the entire time keeping its tired yellow eyes trained on us.

‘Shoo!’ the woman said quietly to the dog. She picked up her baby and turned to us with such a warm smile that we smiled back, even though we could say nothing and so just stood there in silence.

The woman asked us shyly to come in and have some milk. We thanked her and followed her into the hut. Everything inside was made of wood – not only the walls, floors, table, benches and bedstead, but also the plates, the hackle on the sill, the salt cellar and the lamp in front of the icon. A wooden fork lay on another windowsill. These wooden things accentuated the air of poverty and cleanliness.

Lëlya took the baby while the woman went down into the cellar to fetch a sweaty pitcher of milk. She wiped the table with a cloth, and as she leaned over her golden hair caught the sunlight. I looked at her fine, wavy hair. She felt my gaze and looked up. There was embarrassment in her soft green eyes. This, and other things as well, told me that a quiet happiness dwelled in her home. For some reason the thought struck me when I looked up at the ceiling. There was a small chandelier with thin wax candles. It had been woven from dry flowers. The unlit candles had been stuck into large crimson thistle heads that served as holders.

‘What’s this?’ I asked the woman. ‘It’s delightful!’

‘It’s just for fun,’ she said, blushing. ‘You can’t light it. My husband made it to bring a little joy into our home. He’s a basket weaver. He makes reed baskets and stools. He also just made a parasol for Panna Yavorskaya.’

Romanin had never heard of a parasol and was amazed when we told him what it was.

Just then the door opened, and a tall young peasant stood on the doorstep. He wore a sleeveless white leather coat with green embroidering over his shoulders. He was very thin and had a shy smile like his wife.

‘Here’s Stas, my husband,’ she said. ‘He’s not like all the others.’

He bowed silently, placed his basket of bast in the corner, sat down at the table and then gave each of us a long look, smiling the entire time. Through the open window we could hear the larks and see them, flapping their wings, as they flew up from the green wheat into the blue sky. Stas looked out of the window and grinned. ‘Our helpers,’ he said. ‘The larks.’

‘Why helpers?’ asked Lëlya.

‘They cheer folks up when they’re at work,’ he said, still grinning warmly. ‘I’ve never seen it, but they say there’s a lark with a golden beak. He’s their leader.’

‘Oh, Stas!’ his wife said. ‘Whoever made that up?’

‘That’s what people say,’ Stas said. ‘Just maybe the larks will save us from the war, just like they did in the days of King Yanko the Ferocious.’

‘People don’t want to listen to old fairytales,’ she told him.

Stas said nothing. He just sat there smiling and drumming his fingers on the table.

‘Well,’ he went on after a while, ‘they don’t have to believe it if they don’t want to. But those who do believe it may just find their life on this earth a bit easier to bear.

‘King Yanko the Ferocious went to war against a neighbouring kingdom, and this kingdom was made up of nothing but peasants who kept themselves busy by ploughing the fields and harvesting their crops. They went to fight Yanko’s knights dressed in their white smocks and armed with nothing but their pitchforks. But the knights had brass breastplates and brass trumpets and their swords had been sharpened on both sides and could split an ox in two in a single blow. It was an unjust war, so unjust that the ground refused to accept the men’s blood. It just ran over the ground to the rivers as if it had been spilled onto glass. The peasants died in their hundreds, their huts were burned to the ground, their widows went mad from grief.

‘Now there lived among the peasants an old hunchbacked fiddler. He played his homemade fiddle at weddings. And this hunchback said: “There are many different birds in this world, even birds of paradise, but the best of them all is the lark. Because he’s a friend of the peasant. He sings for the sowing, and so that our harvests are rich and bountiful. He sings to the ploughman to lighten his work, and he sings louder than the reapers’ scythes to make them forget about their labours and so gladden their hearts. The larks have a leader among them – he’s the smallest and youngest among them and he has a beak of gold. You must send to him for help. He won’t let the peasants be mown down. He’ll save all of us, brothers, and our wives and children and our green fields.” So the peasants sent messengers to the lark.’

‘What sort of messengers?’ asked his wife.

‘All kinds. Sparrows and swallows and even a bald woodpecker – the very one that pecked a hole right through the wooden cross in the church at Lyubartov. And so,’ here Stas gave us a wily look, ‘the larks came flying to the peasant kingdom in their thousands. They landed on the rooftops and said to the women: “You, mothers and wives, you, sisters and sweethearts, what would you give to end this war?”

‘“Everything,” they shouted. “Take everything, down to the last crumb.”

‘“Well then,” said the larks, “if you really mean it, go now and gather all your knitting wool and your embroidery thread hidden away in every last room and carry it out to the common beyond the village.”

‘The women did as they were told. In the middle of the night, thousands of larks landed on the common, picked up the skeins of thread and wool and flew to the camp of King Yanko the Ferocious and began to circle in thick clouds around his knights, unwinding the skeins and tying up the soldiers in these threads just like a spider does a fly in its web. At first the knights managed to rip the threads, but the larks flew faster and faster and wrapped them tighter and tighter until the knights fell to the ground and could move neither their hands nor their feet and began choking on the wool in their mouths. Then the peasants came, removed the knights’ breast-plates, took their swords, loaded the soldiers into carts, took them back over the border, and then tossed them into a ravine like so much rubbish. As for King Yanko the Ferocious, he swallowed so much wool that he turned blue in the face and choked to death, to the joy of all good people.’

Stas paused.

‘And so, gentlemen,’ he said, laughing, ‘we ought to go and find that lark with the golden beak.’

We left the hut early that evening. Stas’s wife accompanied us to the main road back to Lublin. Stas stayed at home. He stood by the door smoking his pipe and watching us go. The woman was carrying her child and told us that Stas was not at all like others and we mustn’t take offence at what he said. We said goodbye at the crossroads.

The sun was setting beyond the Vepsh. Rising to replace it above the silent woods and fields, a sliver of a moon shone silver in the darkening sky.

The woman gave me her hand. I don’t know why but I bowed and then kissed this rough hand that smelled of bread. She didn’t snatch it away. ‘Thank you,’ she said simply, raising her eyes to me. ‘Please come back and see us again. I’ll bake you some flatbreads and Stas will get some fish from the Vepsh.’

We promised to come back, but the next day our train was sent to Sedltse and from there on to Warsaw, and I never saw Stas, the young woman or their baby again. For a long time I felt a gnawing regret, even though I don’t know why. Perhaps it was because I, along with so many of my generation, felt the want in those days of the simple happiness that this affectionate Polish peasant woman so obviously possessed.

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The Great Swindler

During one of our stops in Brest a smart-looking lieutenant with a rimless pince-nez and a limp came to call on Dr Pokrovsky. Lieutenant Sokolovsky told a rather common story. He had been wounded and now, released from hospital, he had three months' convalescent leave, yet since he had no relations and nowhere to go, he asked whether we might take him on as an orderly on the train for the next three months. He said that despite his limp, he felt just fine. All Sokolovsky's papers were in order, and so Dr Pokrovsky agreed to take him on and brought him to the staff room. We students had a deep distrust of all officers and so were immediately on our guard. Had he been a mere ensign, we would have got on with him, but a lieutenant was a different matter.

From the moment of Sokolovsky's arrival, wonders began. 'This is no way to live, you monks!' he said in a loud voice. 'Call that a clean floor? Go and fetch me two buckets of water, one hot, the other cold, you bookworms, and I'll teach you how to scrub a floor. Well, hop to it! Two pails of water, and no answering back!'

Nobody moved. We all just stared at Sokolovsky without saying a word.

'Too proud, are you?' he said in a derisive tone. 'Well, I'm proud too, but I'll show you just the same.'

He took off his tunic with its St George's cross and in nothing but a white shirt and a pair of sky-blue braces marched off to the kitchen. He soon returned with two buckets of water. Yelling at us to pick up our feet, he began scrubbing the floors in the carriage and did such an excellent job of it that we had to admit that he truly was an expert in this business.

What followed was even more inexplicable.

Sokolovsky took Lyakhman's guitar down off the wall, strummed a few chords and then launched into a plaintive Georgian song. Next he sang an Armenian song, followed by Ukrainian, Jewish, Polish, Finnish and Latvian numbers, before finishing this concert with a virtuoso performance of 'A Pair of Bays' in Gypsy style, complete with hoots and hollers.

It turned out that Sokolovsky was fluent in a number of languages and knew every last corner of Russia intimately. There was no town he had not visited and whose inhabitants of note he was not acquainted with. These strange qualities made us even more suspicious of Sokolovsky, especially after he forged Dr Pokrovsky's signature and medical stamp on a prescription to purchase a bottle of pure alcohol from the local chemist and then proceeded to drink it down in one night.

'Take care, my friends,' said orderly Grekov, a taciturn student from Moscow. 'Fate has brought a sinister character our way. We must be prepared for any disasters. It's imperative we find out what he was doing before the war.'

Romanin put the question to Sokolovsky that very day. Sokolovsky narrowed his handsome yet insolent eyes. He stared at Romanin for a long time before answering in a quiet, threatening voice: 'Ah, so that's it! You want to know what I was doing back then? Well, I was a cantor in a synagogue. That's one! A sword swallower in the circus. Two! A photographer at the Imperial Court. Three! And, by the way, I was also Prince Mikhail Shervashidze, ruler of Abkhazia. Satisfied? Or would you like to hear more? Then I shall confess to you, my dear colleagues, that I was also a gynaecologist and the leader of the Gypsy choir at the Yar.[1] Any more questions?'

No one said a word. Sokolovsky gave a good-natured laugh and threw his arms around Romanin's shoulders. 'Come on now, I was nothing more than a travelling salesman, hence all my talents, although I could have been a student, just like you.'

Sokolovsky was obviously making fun of us. He tried to come across as relaxed and jovial but was now so pale with anger that the small white scar on his lip had ceased to show.

The wonders continued. No matter what the card game, be it snap or Polish faro, Sokolovsky always won. It wasn't long before he admitted to being an expert card sharper and gave us a lecture on the art of cheating, complete with historical references and practical demonstrations. Sokolovsky picked up a batch of cards with two fingers and said: 'Here I hold nineteen cards. Please check for yourselves, gentlemen!'

We counted. Sokolovsky played this little trick more than once, and every time he was right. It was incomprehensible, beyond anything we had ever encountered before, it made no sense and left us

confused and exhausted. Everything to do with Sokolovsky gave us a headache. His tricks became ever stranger. Sokolovsky would place a box of matches or cigars on the bed and instruct us not to take our eyes off it, but somehow it would vanish into thin air right in front of us. Sokolovsky sat there the whole time with his hands in the pockets of his breeches, before miraculously removing the box from the pocket of one of us orderlies.

'Nothing to get excited about!' he would say. 'Basic stuff, really. The fact is the human eye is a crude instrument capable of capturing only slow movements. Certain speeds are simply beyond its power of perception. I trained my hands for ten years to acquire such speed. Ten years, mind you! That's a lot more work than poring over some old books on Roman law or histology. Yes, sir! Vaudeville is truly something, all the rest is nonsense!'[2]

The front was quiet at the time. There were few wounded to look after, but a great many sick, especially epileptics. In those days one rarely heard the word 'epilepsy'. The disease was largely known by its popular name – 'falling sickness'. Epileptics were forbidden from being transported with the wounded. They were collected into groups at the field hospitals and then sent together by a separate train to the rear. This was an unpleasant and difficult business, and so the field hospitals came up with various tricks to get rid of the epileptics as quickly as possible. They bandaged the men's arms and legs, even put them in splints or plaster casts, and sent them off on the hospital trains together with the wounded. Yet on the journey these men began suffering from fits, which drove nearly every man in the carriage out of his mind with terror.

Our doctors tried their best to separate the epileptics from the wounded before they were loaded onto the trains and could be sent back to the hospitals. They were rarely successful since the epileptics presented no outward signs of their illness. Sokolovsky offered to help the doctors. He asked Pokrovsky for permission to accompany the doctors as they made their inspections before the trains left the station. Pokrovsky laughed, but agreed – he too was intrigued by this unusual orderly. And so began the 'historic' inspection. Sokolovsky entered one of the carriages with the doctors. He quickly cast his eyes over the wounded men and then said to one greybeard with a bandaged arm: 'You, fellow, over here!'

The soldier got up from his bed and walked over.

'All right, let me have a look at you!' Sokolovsky ordered. His burning eyes penetrated the nervous soldier. 'Don't avert your eyes. It won't do any good.'

Sokolovsky drew up close to the soldier and asked in a soft, compassionate voice too low for any of the other wounded to hear: 'Got the falling sickness?'

The soldier shuddered and his face dropped. 'Yes, sir,' he pleaded in a whisper. 'But it's not my fault.'

'Then get out of this carriage!'

In this manner Sokolovsky uncovered seven epileptics on this single run and they were returned to the hospital. After that, the hospital authorities didn't dare try to sneak any more epileptics onto our trains.

'Who is this?' they asked us. 'Is he really a clairvoyant or just some swindler? Just how's he able to do this?'

Sokolovsky replied to the doctors' questions with a polite smile. 'I can't tell you a thing. Believe me when I say I have no idea how I do it.'

Most of the orderlies and doctors treated Sokolovsky with friendly curiosity. They were amused by this undeniably talented but odd and empty man. Others, however, such as Romanin and myself, found having to deal with him upsetting. We were repelled by his ceaseless clowning, his bragging, his cold cynicism and his incessant noise making. What I came to find most surprising was that in the depths of the eyes of this man, who had evidently been brought up on barracks humour, one could at times catch a glimpse of a timid, doglike appeal for pity. Where had he come from? What sort of social milieu or set of circumstances creates such people?

I never once saw Sokolovsky sad or depressed. Ever since I have been convinced that the capacity to feel sadness is one of the things that define being fully human. Someone who is incapable of feeling grief is just as pitiful as someone who has no understanding of what joy is or has lost all sense of humour. The lack of any one of these qualities attests to an irreparable spiritual deficit. Sokolovsky told me once that his entire life he had wanted nothing more than to do good for others, but he simply wasn't foolish enough for such a thing. I didn't believe him.

The unhealthy condition in the train, particularly in the staff room, that had begun with the appearance of Sokolovsky could not last long. The end came suddenly.

One day we stopped in Keltse. The chief doctor let a few of us orderlies go into town for the evening. The town was dark and deserted. We stopped at a simple café. It was brightly lit inside and smelled of chocolate; the two waitresses – sisters – were standing about chattering. The wet night didn't appear so depressing now that we were looking out at it through the window's dark glass. We sat and quietly drank

our coffee. At a far table a sapper dozed, lulled to sleep by the warmth of the café, the smell of coffee and vanilla, and the muted voices of the blonde sisters.

The glass door of the café flew open with a bang and in walked Sokolovsky. He was without a greatcoat and wore a brand-new uniform of a cornet in the Hussars. Silver epaulettes flashed on his shoulders. His cavalry sword clattered on the red brick floor as he walked. We stared at Sokolovsky in shocked silence. He slowly came over to us. His face was distorted in a terrible grimace, his eyes were bloodshot. He stopped and glared at Romanin.

'I didn't know you were in the Hussars, Sokolovsky,' said Romanin. 'Have a seat.'

'Stand up!' Sokolovsky shouted in a wild voice. 'Don't you know to salute an officer? Forgotten your place, have you, you dogs?'

'Knock it off,' Romanin said, not too sure of himself. 'You're drunk.'

'Shut up!' roared Sokolovsky, drawing his sword. 'I'll cut you into pieces, you little puppies. I'll show you who the real Sokolovsky is!'

He slammed the sword down onto our table. The table split in two and the cups went flying. The sisters shrieked. The sapper opened his eyes and jumped. A frenzied Sokolovsky swung the sword at Romanin, but Grekov hit him in the back with all his might. Sokolovsky fell onto the broken table and dropped his sword.

We ran out of the café and took off through some back alleys until we came to the railway tracks and followed them to our train. We went straight to Pokrovsky and told him everything that had happened in the café. He ordered us to lock the staff room for the night and should Sokolovsky return, not to let him in. We were to report the incident the next morning to the commandant.

I went to the operating carriage to sterilise some bandages in preparation for taking on more wounded the next day. In the middle of the night I heard someone trying to open the door with a key but I had bolted both locks and he couldn't get in. The person fiddled with the key for a long time and then started tapping at the window. I went over and looked out. There was Sokolovsky, without his forage cap and with a soldier's greatcoat thrown over his shoulders.

'Let me in for the night,' he said. 'You've got to hide me, friend.'

'No!' I said. 'I'm not letting you in.'

'If I had my Nagant right now,' he said with a twisted grin, 'I'd blast a hole in you, you little pup, and send you off to your dead grandmother. Still not gonna let me in, eh?'

'No.'

Sokolovsky stepped closer to the window.

'Someday, God willing, we'll meet again. Take a good look, boy, remember this face. That might just give you enough time to say a quick prayer before I drain every last drop of blood from your body.'

'Romanin, come here!' I called out, even though I knew he wasn't in his dispensary.

Sokolovsky spat hard at the window, stepped back and then disappeared into the darkness. I put out the light, retrieved the revolver we kept in the drawer under the bandages and sat up waiting for an attack. But Sokolovsky never returned. He had vanished. Five or six days later, however, while we were stopped at Radom, a friendly-looking young peasant appeared, handed the duty orderly a wooden box wrapped in canvas, and then turned and walked away. On the box were the words 'To the Nurses of Field Hospital Train No. 217'.

The orderly delivered the box to the head nurse. Removing the canvas she found written: 'A pair for each of the nurses. With fond memories, Lieutenant Sokolovsky.'

The nurses opened the box. Inside was a collection of small black jewel boxes lined with lilac-coloured velvet containing a pair of diamond earrings for every nurse. Pokrovsky immediately ordered they be handed over to the station commandant.

Three days later we read in a small Brest newspaper about an unusually violent robbery of a jewellery store in Vilnius. That same day the commandant came to see Pokrovsky and asked: 'Did you employ an orderly who went by the name of Sokolovsky?'

'Yes, he worked for me.'

'Where's he now?'

'I don't know.'

'You should try to find out.'

'Why?'

'Because he's rather big game.'

'But I'm no hunter,' Pokrovsky answered with a laugh.

'Too bad!' the commandant said mysteriously and then walked off without bothering to explain what he had meant or say what he knew about Sokolovsky.

We came up with all sorts of theories in light of his comment, but then, with time, forgot all about Sokolovsky. It was not until two years later that I heard his name again. I was working at the time at the Novorossiisk Factory in the smoky town of Yuzovka in the Don Basin. We had a draughtsman in our workshop named Grinko, a former Socialist Revolutionary. He was a pale, tubercular fellow who went around in a floppy hat and with a dismissive air of irony towards everything around him. I was living in a cheap room at the Hotel Great Britain. It was in that musty room that Grinko told me how a court in Yekaterinoslav had sentenced him to five years' exile in Siberia for his membership of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

On the way to Siberia, in Kharkov, their convict train stopped to pick up a young man in irons and a rimless pince-nez. The carriage was full of petty thieves and other riff-raff. The young man gave them one look and said 'Well?' The riff-raff stopped talking at once and cleared out an entire compartment for him, even though the carriage was crammed with convicts, and afterwards did everything possible to win his approval. The draughtsman noticed that even the guards treated the young man with a certain respect and did him favours.

The man in irons invited Grinko into his compartment, where he said that he too was an educated man, fluent in several languages, and a lover of music. Grinko told the man of his misfortunes. He listened carefully, then leaned in and said in a whisper: 'I'll get you out.'

'How?'

'No lie! It's ridiculous to spend two years in Siberia on such an idiotic charge. Two years of exile would do you in.'

He asked Grinko to tell him all about his case, which he did, even though he didn't believe that this convict in irons could do anything to help. He assumed the man was just bragging for the sake of it.

But then at some small junction in the province of Penza the train stopped. An officer of the gendarmes boarded carrying with him a telegram sent from Yekaterinoslav ordering that, after further examination into the case of Grinko, he was to be removed from the train and sent to the town of Narovchat and there held in prison until further instruction. As they removed Grinko from the train, the man in irons gave him a wink and told him in the future 'to be more cautious on the turns'.

Grinko did not stay long in the remote prison at Narovchat. Soon another telegram arrived from the court in Yekaterinoslav stating that the draughtsman had been retried *in absentia* and acquitted for lack of evidence. The prison warden shook Grinko's hand and wished him well. Yet as soon as Grinko arrived back at Yekaterinoslav station, he was arrested and charged with attempted escape. It was only then that Grinko realised that this entire complicated business of his 'release' had been organised by the young man in irons.

'He's a well-known criminal,' the draughtsman told me. 'The head of a powerful organisation of thieves and forgers. Apparently, he had bribed one of the guards to send a message about me to one of his people in Kursk. It was all done with great care and precision, and I, like a fool, fell right into their little trap and so was arrested a second time.'

'Tell me,' I said, 'did this young man in irons have any distinguishing marks on him?'

'He had a scar on his lip. His name was Sokolovsky. And he had a limp.'

And so I told him about the mysterious orderly by the name of Sokolovsky.

'That's him!' said Grinko. 'He must have been hiding from the police, and your train was the perfect place.'

'But why did he use his real name?'

'Because there are thousands and thousands of Sokolovskys. And besides, men like him sometimes like to play with fire and tempt fate.'

Over the course of many years I became convinced that every encounter leaves its trace, even an encounter with such a man as Sokolovsky. From some of the hints he dropped I guessed that even as a child he had suffered more than his share of injustices. Embittered, he invested all his talents in avenging his humiliations no matter what the cost.

[1] Popular Moscow restaurant in the early 1900s known for its Gypsy choir.

[2] Oft-quoted line from Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*.

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The Ocean Liner Portugal

The summer of 1915 was hot and dry. From the windows of the train we watched brown curtains of dust sweep over the fields of Poland. The army was retreating. The dust of defeat, with its bitter smell of charred ruins, covered everything – the soldiers' faces, the grain in the fields, the guns, the train. Our red goods wagons had turned grey. Now we never stopped anywhere for longer than three or four hours. The train was in constant motion. The wounded kept coming. Once we stopped to pick up some wounded men along the right bank of the Vistula in Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. Fighting was taking place in a section of the city near the Mokotów Gates. Small fires reflected off the waters of the Vistula. Smoke and darkness had settled over the houses. Gunshots crackled on the far side of the river. It sounded as if someone were tearing heavy cloth in short, violent bursts.

The wind was blowing from the east. It filled Praga with the fresh air of the night. But the train held onto the hot stuffy air of the day, especially in my operating carriage, whose windows were sealed up tight; the smell of dressing and bandages had no escape. At the time we were carrying casualties from Poland to Gomel. As soon as the train reached Polesia, the air became fresh again. The damp forests and quiet rivers of Belorussia seemed to us a cool paradise. The wounded men came to life and lifted their heads to gaze at the rustling groves of aspen or the evening sky as it faded to green.

By the middle of summer, the train had become so worn out that it was ordered to the railway workshops in Odessa for urgent repairs. We went through Kiev, the city of my childhood. I saw it once again from a siding at dawn. The sun was already gilding the tops of the poplars and burned in the windows of the tall houses built from the yellow Kiev brick. I recalled the city's morning streets, freshly sprinkled and still full of shadows, its housewives carrying home warm rolls and bottles of cold milk in their bags. But for some reason nothing tugged at me to return to the coolness of these streets – Kiev had receded into the irredeemable past. The past was gone for good reason. I convinced myself of this later on the two or three occasions when I tried to relive it. 'Nothing in life ever returns,' Father loved to say, 'except our mistakes.' And the fact that nothing in life ever does repeat itself is one of the things that makes our existence so endlessly fascinating.

After Kiev the soft, sun-drenched hills of Ukraine rolled by our windows. Somehow the smell of marigolds, growing in yellow clumps around every crossing keeper's hut, managed to find its way into the train. The steppes, cut by golden swathes of sunflowers, stretched out before us. All day long the air in the glassy distance shimmered through a film of haze. I tried to convince Romanin that the lustre spreading across the horizon was caused by reflections, high up in the atmosphere, of the sun's rays refracting off the sea. For once Romanin neither argued nor made fun of me. Instead, he recited at the top of his voice in the dispensary:

> Behold the sea, a turquoise flame,
> How it glistens, its foam so pearly.
> Wave after wave, each the same,
> Crashes on its banks, so troubled, so heavy.[1]

I woke up outside Odessa. The train was standing at a halt. I jumped from the platform onto the railway bed. Cockle shells crunched under my feet. I saw the halt's small station building with its red-tiled roof. Tall maize was growing up beside a white wall; the wind ruffled its long leaves. The red of the roof and the green of the corn highlighted the sky's magnificent blue.

'Now that truly does look like the sun's reflection off the sea,' Romanin said to me, poking his head out the window.

There was the smell of sage. It was then that this bitter smell became forever associated in my mind with the Black Sea. Sage and sea became so linked in my imagination that later, even in the north, when I caught the scent of sage I would involuntarily listen for the distant sound of the sea. Sometimes I actually thought I heard it, only to realise that this was the wind in the pines, not the waves crashing against the shore. I was happy to know that in a few hours I would be back by the sea. Ever since

childhood, its cheerful, frothy vastness had imprinted itself on my soul.

We stopped to unload at the goods yard in Odessa. From there, the sea was not visible; all I could see was the main railway station, gleaming brightly in the distance. Nonetheless, everything around me seemed touched by the sea; even the puddles of oil on the tracks were shot with the blue of its waters. Some old buffers from a scrapped engine lying on the ground were covered with ship's rust, or so it seemed to me at the time.

We orderlies were billeted in an old third-class passenger carriage. We quickly moved our things. A shunting engine then nudged our carriage out of the way, finally depositing us alongside a low fence surrounding an abandoned garden, and here we remained for our entire stay in Odessa. We liked our new home. In the mornings we washed at the water pump next to our train. The wispy shadows of the acacias caressed our windows.

From the other side of the garden came the sounds of a small market and beyond that lay the Odessa suburb of Moldavanka – the refuge of thieves, fences, swindlers, barrow boys and a great many other characters of dubious and murky occupation. The doctors and nurses had been put up at a country house in the Maly Fontan area not far from the city centre. We visited them almost every day.

I didn't manage to get a look at the sea the day we arrived. The following day, I rose very early, bathed in the salty water alongside the tracks, and headed for the market for a glass of milk and something to eat. The market women sat on their stools with their sleeves rolled up and their faces red from the heat and from shouting. All day long they quarrelled and chattered among themselves and called out to customers, either beckoning them to their stalls or making fun of them. They swore at each other in intentionally shrill voices, one minute forgetting their own quarrels to mock the customers, then the next trying to ingratiate themselves, and at times even flirting with them, and all of this done in a friendly sort of way.

'My boy!' they cried to me. 'Try some of my baked milk! It still has the skin on it! You know your dear sweet mama told you to drink milk with the skin on it!'

'Toasted sunflower seeds! Sunflower seeds!' cried others. 'A pocketful for a kopeck! Just one old kopeck!'

The row of fishmongers was the most interesting. I loved to just stand there next to the cold zinc counters covered with fish scales and sprinkled with rock salt. Large flat turbot, bony purplish growths covering their backs, stared up at the sky with dimming eyes. Mackerel thrashed about in wet baskets, looking like blue mercury. Brown perch slowly opened their mouths and smacked their lips, as if tasting the market's morning freshness. Bullheads were piled high – black 'stonefish', yellow 'sandfish' and reddish 'whips'. A group of especially ingratiating market women sat around a few baskets of tiny fish called *firinka*. Women bought them as cat food, but that was it.

'For your little kitties, ladies! For your kitty-cats!' they called, doing their best to coax the housewives at the market.

Carts stood piled high with mountains of apricots and cherries. The owners of these riches, German colonists from Lustdorf and Liebenthal, lay asleep, snoring in the warm dust under their carts, while little Jewish boys from the *cheder*, hired to sell the fruit, sat up on top, their eyes closed, and, rocking to and fro as if in prayer, chanted plaintively: 'Ai, ai, good people, ai, ai, good gentlemen! Cherries! Cherries and sweet apricots! Ai, ai, just five kopecks a pound! We're giving them away! Ai, ai, good people, step up and buy, step up and try! Come, eat, eat!'

The ground was littered with apricot stones and cherry pits and bloody red pulp. I bought some raisin bread and walked over to the far edge of the market to eat next to a stand where Ukrainian sausages sizzled in frying pans and the unbearable Black Sea sun reflected off a line of boiling, dented old samovars set out on large tables. I sat down at the table. Its homespun tablecloth contained a message embroidered in cross-stitch: 'Little Raichka, never forget your native Ovidiopol'. In the middle of the table peonies floated in a blue bowl of chipped enamel.

Having finished a plate of sausages and turning to my cup of hot, sweet tea, I decided that life in Odessa was beautiful. Just then a lean man in a sailor's cap with a cracked leather peak sat down next to me. The sides of his ashen face were covered by stiff yellow whiskers that bristled like a lynx.

'Excuse me, young man,' he asked in a hushed voice, as if he were plotting something, 'might you be an orderly?'

'Yes, I am.'

'From the train that arrived yesterday for repairs?'

'Yes, from that very train,' I answered, surprised by this all-knowing stranger in the broken cap.

'Then allow me to introduce myself,' he said, raising his cap with both hands and then placing it back down over his bald head. 'Aristarkh Lipogon, retired coastal skipper and born sailor, at your service.'

‘What’re you pestering the young man for?’ shouted a red-faced market woman who had served my tea. ‘Leave him be!’

‘Auntie Raichka,’ the born sailor replied with extreme politeness, ‘what gives you the damned idea you can go butting into other folks’ business? Why are you trying to steal every last crumb of bread out of my mouth? You, one can see, are fat and doing just fine, while I’m as hungry as an empty barrel. Understand?’

Auntie Raichka grumbled a bit but then stopped talking.

‘I’m pleased to be of assistance,’ Lipogon said. ‘I never shrink from offering whatever services might be required, be they for yourself or for your doctors who have taken up residence in that luxurious Bykhovsky country house in Maly Fontan. I work fast and cheap.’

‘And what exactly is it that you do “fast and cheap”?’ I asked.

‘I can get my hands on anything you might wish and deliver it to your carriage. Tobacco, for example, straight from Constantinople, and free of any import duty. But it wouldn’t be right to call it tobacco. Finely spun curls of gold would be more like it. Or maybe some nice, powdery French cocaine, or Greek vodka, or Messina oranges of the rarest aroma and flavour. And then there’s fresh tinned goods, bullfish in tomato sauce, canned this very day and straight from our Odessa factory. By the second day they’ve already lost a bit of their divine taste. I highly recommend! I have the widest network of contacts in the city and the port. You can ask anyone, and if he’s an honest man he’ll tell you: “Lipogon can do anything. Lipogon has twenty legs, forty hands and a hundred eyes.”’

‘But just one tongue, you crook!’ Auntie Raichka said crossly. ‘Just one tongue, like every mortal, but you wag it enough for seven.’

I told Lipogon that I didn’t need anything, but maybe the doctors and nurses might. I would ask them.

‘As it happens,’ said Lipogon, ‘I’m calling on them tonight. Nice meeting you, young man.’

Once more he raised his battered cap with both hands and then set it back down on his bald head before walking off, swinging his coat tails and singing casually:

> There was a midshipman, young and fair,
> Brown as the earth was his hair,
> Odessa he did up and leave, that very city
> He’d always found so pretty . . .

‘You have there before you, my son,’ said Auntie Raichka, ‘the perfect example of how too much imagination can ruin a man.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, surprised.

‘There was a time’, she replied sadly, ‘when that man lived well. He sailed his little boat back and forth from Kherson to Odessa carrying watermelons to market. He wore a decent suit, had enough to eat every day, and an extra twenty in his pocket. But no! That wasn’t enough for him! I know him well, ever since we were children back in Ovidiopol. He lived next door to me. Never was satisfied to live life like the rest of us. “I can’t stand it, Raichka,” he’d say, “this boring grey existence is crushing my soul. Raichka, I want to live like they do in novels – full of tears and flowers, overflowing with music and passionate love. I have to risk it all, just like the writers describe it. I’ll either make it rich or be destroyed!”’

‘And we certainly know how that turned out!’ sighed another market woman, laying out her bluish aubergines along the ground. ‘He was destroyed!’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘He got married,’ said Auntie Raichka, ‘but just you listen how, and to whom! We used to have a Romanian orchestra here in Odessa. It wasn’t really Romanian, but folks from all over. Some from the Caucasus, some from Kishinëv, some even from right here in Moldavanka. Well, there was this woman, Tamara, the orchestra’s cymbalist. She was beautiful, striking even, that’s the truth. So, he went and married her. He’d been dazzled by all the glitter, I guess, all the sequins, the velvet, the cymbals, the waltzes. “I’ll give her such a life,” he said, “that Vera Kholodnaya herself will be green with envy.”’[2]

‘He did that all right!’ the aubergine seller chimed in.

‘Well, he did try to do his best for the woman,’ Auntie Raichka replied in Lipogon’s defence. ‘And he still does. Since the day of their wedding, he’s chased after every last kopeck. He even took to smuggling contraband on his boat. He got caught, of course, and they took away his import licence. He’d have gone to prison if he hadn’t paid them off. He ended up on the streets, but still he managed to find a flat for her. And what a flat it was! More like a box of fancy chocolates all tied up with a pink ribbon and fine lace! After losing his boat he took to second-hand dealing and accepted all kinds of petty jobs. His reputation was ruined, and he sank lower and lower. But he’s never given up on his grand designs. Nothing but lies and more lies! He hides his poverty from Tamara. She’s a lazy woman and a bit touched

herself. Can't be bothered with anything. Lies about all day long by her window reading tattered old books and playing her gramophone. Puts on a record– 'The Night's Breath' or 'I Dreamed of You Last Night' – and just reads and reads. She's no good. She doesn't give a damn about anything, along as she's got herself a bit of halva. She doesn't want to open her eyes and see how this man has destroyed himself for her, how he's gone to the dogs. All she cares about are her stupid romance novels. *Tfu*! I say, to hell with her!'

With that, Auntie Raichka spat crossly. 'That man will end up in the army's penal battalions, mark my words, young man!'

I went back to my carriage and was about to go down to the seashore when we were ordered to the railway workshop to help the workers scrape all the old paint off the train. We worked all day. I went home to clean up and then left for the country house in Maly Fontan. There at last, from the top of a cliff, I saw the sea. The evening's misty haze had merged with the pale blue expanse of the water. The waves far below rumbled faintly over the shingle, and the first star of the night began to glow beneath a silver bird-wing of a cloud.

The lighthouses were dark. The hulking mass of a ship could still be made out on the darkening horizon. This was the Turkish cruiser *Medjidie*, shelled by our coastal artillery and gone aground on the rocks. It still hadn't been towed away. The cruiser was slowly being consumed by the twilight and before long disappeared.

I ran down a steep path to the sea. Dry acacias clung to the stony soil. Large flat stones skittered under my feet. Stiff broom pointed dark arrows in all directions; yellow flowers shone, somehow, in the darkness. I smelled mussels and fried mackerel – the nurses were cooking on an open fire near the house. Reaching the sea, I undressed and walked out into the dark, fresh water until it was up to my neck. The reflections of the stars swam about me like tiny jellyfish. I tried not to move to keep them from breaking into dozens of rocking sparks. It took a long time until they settled down and reappeared as reflected stars. With all my body I felt the restrained but powerful pulse of the sea. It rocked back and forth ever so slightly.

The sea lay just below my eyes, at the level of my chin. My heart pounded at the thought that before me was nothing but an expanse of water stretching far into the distance, to the Bosphorus, to the shores of Greece and Egypt, to the Adriatic and the Atlantic, that before my very eyes began the great oceans that stretched around the world. The smell of stocks floated over the water. Far off in the direction of the Dniester estuary, a cannon shot rang out and echoed along the shore. The war had even made its way to these lands that seemed to have been created specifically for a happy, constructive life, the life of sailors, gardeners, winemakers, artists, children and lovers, lands that promised a carefree childhood, a productive adulthood and an old age as bright and clear as a September day.

The nurses called to me from the shore. I got out of the water, dressed, and went up to the house. There, under the verandah's striped awning, stood Lipogon, cap in hand, ingratiating himself with the nurses. He had already managed to sell them a small canvas bag of Greek olives. We went back to town together.

'I gather', Lipogon said to me on the tram, 'that you're a true lover of the sea.'

I said he was correct.

'Then you shouldn't be riding about on a train, in those beaten-up old goods wagons, you belong on a hospital ship. The hospital ship *Portugal* is in Odessa harbour right now. It's an old French steamer.'

'Well, I suppose so,' I said cautiously, 'Sure, I'd love to be on that steamer.'

'I can fix it!' he said matter-of-factly. 'I know a way. I am acquainted with the ship's junior doctor. I supply him with contraband tobacco. Be at the Quarantine Pier tomorrow at one o'clock. I'll be waiting for you by the *Portugal*. I won't charge you anything. Just treat me to a nice meal in town and we'll call it even!'

He was quiet for a few moments.

'Someday,' he said, leaning in close so I could hear him over the rumble of a passing tram, 'I'll tell you all about myself. People say the worst things about me. The fact is my life is like one of those serialised novels you read in the magazines. I've got a secret life. Of course, fate has dealt me some harsh blows. But I dare say no one's more respectable than I. The fact is I've just had rotten luck, and that's why my plans have no room to blossom.'

Out of the dark night, cold blasts of air tore through an open window of the unlit tram. At the time, the lights had been turned out in all the port cities.

'If I had my way,' said Lipogon, 'I'd sail the seven seas. What a life that'd be. Like a painting by Aivazovsky!'[3]

The next day I arrived at the Quarantine Pier at ten o'clock in the morning instead of one in the

afternoon. Alongside the breakwater a white ocean liner with two huge red crosses on its sides was dissolving in the dazzling, dry sunlight. On the stern I read an inscription in gold French lettering: 'Portugal-Marseille'.

There was something unreal about the whiteness of the ship, its ethereal masts, rigging and bridges, its shiny brass, the gem-like sharpness of its portholes, and the sparkle of its decks, as if this ship had arrived from some festive other world, as if it had been made from hardened light. This was a passenger liner of the French company Messageries Maritimes. Before the war it had plied between Marseilles, Madagascar, Syria and Arabia, and for some reason had sailed into the Black Sea. There it was caught by the war with Turkey, and so by agreement with the French government the *Portugal* was handed over to us for use as a hospital ship. We painted it white. Young nurses in grey summer dresses and sailors in white were walking about on the decks of the *Portugal*. I didn't want to be seen waiting, and so left to stroll around the port until one o'clock.

At precisely one that afternoon I returned to the ship. At the foot of the gangway stood Lipogon chatting casually with a young naval doctor. The doctor had sarcastic dark eyes and a red neck, as if the white collar of his tunic were too tight. He gave me a brief handshake before turning once more to Lipogon: 'All right then, goodbye, skipper! Bring me some more tobacco once I'm back from my trip.'

'Aye aye, sir!' Lipogon said with exaggerated enthusiasm, before saluting and walking off.

The doctor took me by the arm and led me to his cabin. He squeezed my arm so tightly that you would have thought he feared I might slip on the glassy-smooth decks, fall and, God forbid, break some shiny instrument or shatter a glass door. I didn't care for this at all, but I kept my mouth shut and didn't try to pull my arm away.

'In short,' the doctor said once we had reached his cabin, which smelled of a mixture of fresh salty sea air and fine tobacco, 'I need another orderly for the dressing station. You're a student? Excellent! And you brought your documents?'

'Yes.'

'Let me see.'

I handed him my documents. He took a quick look and gave them back.

'Consider the matter settled,' he said. 'Come back the day after tomorrow. We just have a few formalities to take care of, and after that we'll need you to remain on board. It's likely we'll be sailing soon.'

I was dazed. I couldn't believe that I'd soon be sailing on an ocean liner. My childhood dreams had come true. Of course, I'd miss the train and my comrades, but my desire to head out to sea trumped everything. The doctor escorted me back to the top of the gangway. A little old man, as fidgety as a monkey, was standing there in some sort of naval uniform that clearly wasn't Russian. Given all the gold braid on his sleeves, I assumed he must be someone high up in the chain of command.

'Our captain, Monsieur Bayard,' the young doctor whispered in my ear.

He bowed to the captain and said in French: '*Monsieur le Capitaine*, may I present our new orderly. He is a student from Moscow.'

I bowed.

'My God, it's simply incomprehensible!' Monsieur Bayard exclaimed, throwing both hands into the air. 'Instead of getting on with their courses, students here are busy spooning kasha into the mouths of Russian peasants. Nobody in this confounded country does what they're supposed to. Nobody!'

With his small but strong brown paws, he grabbed my shoulders, swung me around and looked me straight in the eyes. 'Oh . . . oh . . . oh, yes, yes indeed,' he said. 'We've all been through this before. I know all about you. Dreams, yes, dreams, of course! But no, no,' he suddenly yelled, 'you've got it all wrong, my friend. Look, there's the sea, out there!'

With that he took off his gold-braided cap and pointed to his grey, closely cropped head. 'It's all here in your head, it is, all those magical nights along the equator, the sunsets in Bengal, the smell of cinnamon and all that other nonsense. It's all just right here! What can I say? You're ill, young man, and the fact is I don't know a single medicine that can cure you. And so, I'm very glad to welcome you aboard my ship.'

He turned on his heels and trotted off to the captain's bridge. The doctor watched him go with an amused but respectful smile. 'That's our captain,' he said. 'A splendid man from Gascony. Well then, until the day after tomorrow.'

The following day I treated Lipogon to lunch at the Dardanelles Restaurant on Stepovaya Street. In fact, it was less of a restaurant and more like a fly-infested cafeteria. Romanin and Nikolashka Rudnev joined us. Both of them were upset by my decision to leave the train and, strange as I found it, neither of them envied me. On the contrary, they seemed to disapprove of my action.

Lunch at the Dardanelles ended in scandal. We were served mutton stew. We ate it and then Lipogon immediately summoned our lazy waiter. ‘Fetch the proprietor,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘It’s not your place to ask.’

The proprietor, a fat man with a greenish face and a sleepy expression, reluctantly shuffled out of a back room. ‘What’s the problem?’ he asked in a hoarse voice. ‘If the food’s not good enough, you’d be better off taking your fancy ways over to the restaurant in the Hotel London. That’s not the kind of place I’m running here.’

‘The problem is, Mr Kamenyuk,’ Lipogon said sinisterly, ‘that you’ve been serving your customers tainted mutton, and so very likely sending them off to heaven for their next meal.’

‘You think so?’ Kamenyuk asked ironically. ‘Well, well, tainted, you say? I’ll have you know I serve only the highest-quality mutton.’

‘And I tell you it’s tainted!’

‘Then why did you eat all of it?’ Kamenyuk asked, the note of irony in his voice now tinged with a hint of danger. ‘You’ve left nothing but the bones. You even mopped the plates with your bread. Don’t take me for a fool. I wasn’t born yesterday.’

‘Oh, really? So your mutton isn’t tainted after all?’ exclaimed Lipogon, with an odd air of triumph. ‘Then I humbly request you bring us four more servings of your lovely ragout.’

Kamenyuk clearly did not care for Lipogon’s last words. ‘We’ve run out of mutton,’ he said, blanching. ‘There’s no more! Understand? And I’m not serving you another thing.’

‘In that case,’ Lipogon sighed, ‘you’ve left me no other choice than to fetch the policeman, Mr Skulsky. It’s now up to the law to decide the matter. And if there’s trouble, Mr Kamenyuk, don’t blame me.’

Kamenyuk slammed his fist on the table. ‘Get out, now, before there’s trouble! Just get out. I don’t want your money. I’m through with you.’ He stared Lipogon straight in the face. ‘And may you choke on that money of yours, you scum!’

We were so shocked by this unexpected turn of events that none of us could get a word out. I did manage to pull out some money and lay it on the table, but I doubt all of it found its way into Kamenyuk’s pocket, for he angrily flung the money at Lipogon, who picked it up and then, with a dramatic show of disdain, flung it back at Kamenyuk. The number of banknotes that Lipogon threw at Kamenyuk, I did manage to notice, was considerably fewer than what Kamenyuk had thrown at Lipogon.

Shaking with anger, I asked Lipogon once we were out on the street: ‘Why did you make that ridiculous scene?’

‘Because you’re students,’ said Lipogon, ‘and you’ve got empty pockets. And that Kamenyuk is getting rich off tainted meat.’

‘But that mutton wasn’t tainted!’

‘Not today, but tomorrow for certain,’ Lipogon said unruffled. ‘You saw how he squirmed when I asked for a second helping. That’s because that son of a bitch wasn’t sure it was still good. If he’d given us that second helping, and it really was tainted, then I’d have material proof for the police. Better for him to get rid of us than take the risk.’

We discussed the incident for a long time back at the train. In the evening we went to the country house so I could say my goodbyes to the doctors and nurses. Everyone there was stunned by my decision. Some were envious, others puzzled. Lëlya alone said nothing, biting her lips and refusing to look at me. We were sitting out on the dark terrace. Down below, the surf murmured softly. Lëlya grabbed my arm. ‘Come with me!’ she said.

We walked out into a darkened garden and then began to make our way down to the sea. Lëlya was still silent, but held me tightly by the arm, the way one holds a naughty boy being led to his punishment. Once we’d reached the water, Lëlya finally stopped. She was breathing heavily.

‘Dreamer!’ she said. ‘You’ve got your head in the clouds! You’re no better than some foolish schoolboy! First thing tomorrow you’re marching straight down to that ridiculous steamer and telling them you’ve changed your mind. Do you hear me?’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Oh my God! Do you really not get it? Because that’s no way to treat your friends, that’s why. Because it’s just not what people do! Of course, it’s much nicer to twiddle your thumbs in that floating drawing room of a hospital with its frilly curtains and scented dolls for nurses than it is to work in the mud and blood of a beaten-up old goods wagon. Even Romanin and Rudnev, and all the rest of your friends, feel uncomfortable about your decision. Don’t pretend you didn’t notice! Of course, no one would say that to your face. Except for me, that is. Because I care . . . Because I want to think well of you . . . And don’t ask me anything that you already know perfectly well yourself.’

‘I didn’t ask you anything.’

‘Fine! Well, go on, I’m waiting.’

A storm raged inside me. In some way, Lëlya was right, of course. But how could I give up this incredible opportunity to go to sea, how could I give up a dream I had waited so long for, ever since I was a young child?

‘No,’ I told her. ‘I can’t turn this down. It’s not at all what you think. You’d be better off not saying anything when you’re so angry.’

‘Very well then, farewell!’ Lëlya blurted, before turning and walking off into the darkness along the white edge of the surf.

I called to her. She didn’t answer. I followed her. She stopped and said in a cold, angry voice: ‘Don’t follow me. You’re being ridiculous! Goodbye. My regards to your new friend . . . what’s his name . . . Lipogon.’

She laughed. I waited. I heard her walk on, then stop, throw a few small stones into the sea and start singing, clearly to make fun of me:

> If you knew how I mourn,
> My heart, ripe with trust and nurture,
> You’d come, and united we’d scorn
> My fate savaged by strange torture.

I turned round, climbed the bank and, without stopping at the house, walked back home into Odessa. It was an unusually dark night. The gardens rustled with the sound of the wind. Twice I was stopped by patrols and asked to present my papers. I kept playing over in my mind everything that had happened, hour by hour, until suddenly I realised with horror that I myself wasn’t sure whether or not I was doing the right thing. I simply did not know!

‘What is this?’ I asked myself. ‘A want of moral decency? An illness? Simply a refusal to look matters squarely in the face? Am I really so flighty as that?’

One moment I thought Lëlya was perfectly right. The next just the opposite, that everything she had said was nothing more than hypocrisy and pretence. But why did Romanin and Rudnev refuse to look me in the eye? What was bothering them? Had they written me off as worthless? Why? And whoever came up with the notion that serving on a hospital ship was some sort of pleasure cruise? No, I would not pass up this opportunity, I was not going to give in. To hell with them! Naturally, I lost my way and didn’t get back to the train until after everyone had fallen asleep. This was fine by me.

The following morning, I went down to the Quarantine Pier, but the *Portugal* was gone, replaced by a rusty coal barge. A man on the barge cleaning sea roach told me that the *Portugal* had sailed the night before for Trebizond.

‘Why?’ I asked, confused. ‘She wasn’t supposed to leave for a few days.’

‘It happens,’ said the man with the fish casually. ‘They got their orders. Urgent, it was. There’s a war on, my friend. But she’ll be back, don’t you worry.’

I was ashamed to have to go back to my carriage and my friends, but I had no choice.

‘So what are you going to do now?’ Romanin asked in an offhand way.

‘Wait for the *Portugal* to return.’

‘Okay then, go on and wait. It’s none of my business, of course.’

I couldn’t bear staying in the carriage any longer, so I took the tram to Lustdorf. I spent the entire day on the beach in Lustdorf, a boring German colony. I didn’t eat a thing all day until evening when I bought myself a dozen apricots. I decided to take the last tram of the day back to Odessa, but it never came and so I walked. It was about twenty kilometres. Again, it was a dark, windy night. Again, the trees rustled in the gardens along the road and acacia seeds, bursting from their pods, peppered my face. I felt all alone in the world. How I wished to see Mama again, to have her ruffle my hair and say, ‘Oh, Kostik, you really are incorrigible!’

I sat down to rest next to the wrought-iron gates of a dacha. There was a stone wall cut with a deep recess for statues. The recess was empty, and so I crawled in, hugged my knees to my chest and sat there for a long time. Finally, I fell asleep. It must have been the presence of a schoolboy, standing with his bike and staring at me, a smile on his face, that woke me up.

‘Good morning!’ he said. ‘You look just like Antokolsky’s statue of Mephistopheles.’[4]

‘There’s no such statue!’ I snapped at him, even though I knew quite well there was. I slid down out of the niche and headed for town. The road was bordered by stone walls. Looking at them, I felt as though I’d seen them before. Could this be Maly Fontan? Off in the distance I could see a metal lantern hanging over the gate by the house where the doctor and nurses lived. I had completely forgotten that the road to

Lustdorf passed by this part of town.

I went up to the gate, opened it and looked into the garden, which ran down to the white, calm sea. It was a cloudy, windless morning. A few drops of rain fell on my face and on the pathway, its pebbles white with dried sea salt. Dark wet spots formed where the rain fell, and then dried as I watched.

They must all still be asleep, I thought. I wished to see Lëlya. My feelings of loneliness from the night before returned. Did they know that the *Portugal* had sailed without me? Probably not. None of the orderlies had any plans yesterday to visit the house. I walked cautiously into the garden. Behind a tall trimmed box hedge I spied the familiar green bench. I sat down. No one could see me from either the terrace or the garden, which was fine with me. I would just rest a bit and then leave without being noticed. A few more drops of rain fell on my face. The gulls screamed over the sea. I raised my head. Someone was hurrying from the house to the gate. I peeped through a gap in the hedge and saw Lëlya.

She was wearing a raincoat but no hat, and her face was paler than I had ever seen before. She was walking fast, almost running. I stood up, parted the branches of the hedge and stepped through to meet her. Catching sight of me she screamed, fell to her knees and then, leaning on one arm, slowly let herself sink onto the grey gravel. Her eyes were closed. I ran to her and tried to lift her by the shoulders, but she didn't move. She moaned quietly and in a faint voice said: 'Oh God, he's alive! Oh, dear God!'

'I missed the *Portugal*,' I said, searching for words, not at all certain what to say to calm her.

'Help me,' she said, lifting her tear-stained face. 'Give me your hand.' She got up with difficulty. 'So, do you really not know?'

'No,' I replied, utterly at a loss.

'Let's go somewhere else, anywhere but here.'

We went into the neglected garden of an empty house next door. There Lëlya wearily sank onto a bench. 'Oh, my God,' she said, looking at me, her eyes full of tears. 'You fool, you fool you! Here, read this!'

She pulled a sheet of paper out of her coat pocket. It was a special bulletin from the *Odessa News*. I unfolded the sheet and saw the black headline: 'Latest German Atrocity. Hospital Ship *Portugal* Torpedoed By German Submarine On Its Way To Sevastopol. No Survivors.'[5] I tossed the paper aside and put my arms around Lëlya. She was sobbing like a little child – without shame or embarrassment – and tears of relief poured down her face.

'Good Lord!' she said through her tears. 'What am I crying for? What nonsense. Please don't think I've gone and fallen in love with you. I was just scared, that's all.'

'Yes, of course, I don't think anything of the sort,' I answered, stroking her wet hair.

'Honestly?' she looked up and smiled at me. 'Hand me my bag, please. I have a handkerchief. I was rushing into town for more news . . . maybe there are some survivors.'

[1] From Nadson's 'By the Sea' (1885). Several of his works were set to music by Sergei Rachmaninoff and César Cui.

[2] Vera Kholodnaya (1893–1919), silent film star.

[3] Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900), Russian-Armenian painter especially known for his romantic seascapes.

[4] Mark Antokolsky (1843–1902), Jewish-Lithuanian sculptor who created many works of famous historical figures.

[5] The *Portugal* was sunk on 30 March 1916 by a German submarine. Of the 273 people on board, more than 100 did, in fact, survive.

54

Over Bombed-Out Roads

More than a month before our trip to Odessa, Romanin and I had put in a request to Moscow for a transfer from the train to a field hospital unit. We wanted to be closer to the war.

Romanin had his own particular reason for wanting the transfer. He told me in secret that he had been writing stories about the war for a radical newspaper in Vyatka and the train was not providing him with enough material. He showed me a few of his published stories. I liked them for their simple and precise language. Romanin talked me into writing two or three stories for this newspaper. I wrote only one. I called it 'Blue Overcoats', and it was published. It described how the entire garrison of several thousand Austrian soldiers at the fortress of Pshemysl had been taken prisoner. We had seen these prisoners in Brest. There was one incident, however, one that had struck not only me but all of us orderlies as strange, that I had not been able to write about.

The prisoners were being led through Brest. A sluggish stream of dingy blue overcoats, thousands of Austrian soldiers and officers shuffled along the city streets in their broken boots. At times the flow came to a halt, and the men, unshaven and dejected, stared at the ground and waited. Then they were ordered to march on, bent under the heavy weight of their unknown destiny. All of a sudden, Hugo Lyakhman grabbed me by the arm. 'Look!' he yelled. 'Over there! Look at that Austrian soldier!' I looked and felt a shiver run down my spine. Walking towards me, in tired yet steady steps and wearing an Austrian uniform, was my very self. I had heard much about doubles but had never actually encountered one. And now here I was face to face with my double. We were each other's duplicates in every last detail, down to the small birthmark on our right temples.

'What the devil!' said Romanin. 'That's downright terrifying.'

What happened next was equally strange. One of the guards looked at me, then at the Austrian, ran up to him, tugged on his sleeve and pointed me out. The prisoner looked, appeared to stumble and then stopped dead. So did the rest of the Austrians. We stared into each other's eyes for what could not have been more than a minute, but what seemed to me like an entire hour. An excited murmur ran through the crowd of prisoners. I detected a look of surprise in the Austrian's dark eyes, which in an instant was replaced by fear. He quickly recovered himself, and, raising a pale hand, he waved at me. There was a shy smile on his sad face.

'March!' the guard bellowed at last.

The blue overcoats swayed and moved on. The Austrian turned round to wave at me several times as he walked. I waved back. So we met and parted, never to see each other again.

There was a lot of talk about this strange incident back on the train. Everyone agreed this Austrian soldier must have been a Ukrainian. And since I was part Ukrainian, our striking similarity was easily explained.

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While still in Odessa, a few days after the sinking of the *Portugal*, Romanin and I received a telegram from Moscow informing us that we were both being transferred to the same field hospital unit and were ordered to leave for Moscow immediately, and from there to our assigned unit. After the recent incident with the *Portugal*, I had been only too glad to stay on the train and was not at all pleased by this new assignment. But there was no getting out of it. I did, however, draw some comfort from the fact that I'd still be working alongside Romanin.

Our friends gave us a noisy send-off at Odessa station. As a joke, someone hired a small Jewish orchestra, naturally with the help of Lipogon. The musicians, old Jews in dusty frock coats who had seen everything in their lives, stood calmly on the platform, fiddling away at the maxixe and the cakewalk, and then, after the third whistle, struck up the old military march 'Longing for the Homeland'. The hundreds of passengers, as well as the hundreds of family and friends who had come to see them off, cheered along with our lively farewell.

At the last moment, Lëlya hugged me tightly, kissed me, and made me promise to write to her. She

whispered in my ear that she too wanted to transfer to a field unit or hospital and so we would probably see each other again somewhere in Poland.

The train started. Lipogon lifted his cap high off his head and held it there until our train disappeared around a bend. The violins sobbed, repeating their familiar tune over and over again. I stuck my head out of the window and watched Lëlya waving her white scarf until she faded from view. And, as always when one phase of my life had ended and another was about to begin, longing filled my heart. Longing, and regret, for the past, and for the friends I was leaving behind.

I lay down on the upper berth and, staring at the ceiling, recalled every single day of this long and troubled year. I knew only one thing for certain: that I had to live as I had this past year – always seeking out new people and places. This was the way to live if I wanted to become a writer.

Nothing had changed in Moscow – the flat permeated with kitchen smells that clung to the very walls, Galya worrying endlessly about nothing, and Mama silent and tight-lipped. I was given a simple uniform and an overcoat with strange silver shoulder straps and a single star, and went off to report to the head of the field hospital units, a man by the name of Chemodanov. Romanin had already left and written me a note to say that Chemodanov was a decent man, a connoisseur of music and the author of many articles on musical matters. I recalled what Captain Bayard had said about how no one in this incomprehensible country did the job they should be doing. Now it occurred to me that the captain had a rather odd understanding of doing what one should. At the moment, given we were at war, everyone should be defending Russia. That I knew for certain.

Chemodanov, a tall, dark-haired and exceptionally polite man in a field jacket, greeted me kindly but with a trace of distrust. ‘I’m afraid you’ll find it difficult in the unit,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘You seem to me rather shy, and in these circumstances, that’s a liability.’

There was nothing I could say to that.

The unit was somewhere near Lublin. I had to go to Brest to find out where exactly. And so I left. I travelled in a first-class carriage crowded with officers. I was ill at ease in my uniform with its shoulder straps and their little star and its shiny sword hilt. A captain, chain-smoking in the seat next to me, noticed my discomfort and asked me just who and what I was, and then he gave me some practical advice: ‘My son,’ he said, ‘salute as often as you can and remember to repeat just two things: “May I?” to your superiors and “Certainly” to your subordinates. That will spare you a lot of trouble.’

It turned out this gruff captain was wrong. The next day I went to the dining car for dinner. All the tables were full. The only empty seat was at a small table opposite a fat, grey-whiskered general. I approached, bowed slightly, and said: ‘May I?’

The general was munching on a piece of roast beef. He mumbled some kind of answer. His mouth was stuffed with meat, and so I had not been able to understand just what he had said. I thought I had heard him say, ‘Certainly.’

I sat down. The general, finally finishing with his piece of beef, stared at me for a long time, his bulging eyes filling with rage. Finally, he said: ‘What’s with this fancy dress, young man? What sort of uniform is that?’

‘This is what they gave me, Your Excellency.’

‘Who, who gave it to you?’ the general shouted.

The dining car suddenly fell silent.

‘The Union of Cities, Your Excellency.’

‘Holy Mother of God!’ the general thundered. ‘I have the honour of being a member of the Supreme Commander’s General Staff, but I never could have imagined such a thing possible! Anarchy in the Russian army! Anarchy, debauchery, utter breakdown!’

He got up, snorting loudly, and left the dining car. Only then did I notice his aiguillettes and the imperial cypher on his epaulettes.

Dozens of officers were now looking at me and laughing.

‘Bad luck!’ said a tall cavalry officer at the table next to me. ‘Do you know who that was?’

‘No.’

‘General Yanushkevich, on the staff of Supreme Commander Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich. His right-hand man. You’d best go back to your compartment and don’t show your face until we reach Brest. The next time might be your last.’

55

The Little Knight

In Brest I made my way to the so-called Medical Units Base – a small house overgrown with wild vines. The base was empty except for one lonely old nurse who was waiting for Gronsky, the head of the units. It turned out I had to wait for Gronsky as well since he was the only one who knew where my unit was.

The nurse was a Pole and spoke with an accent. 'He's such a flighty man, Pan Gronsky,' she sighed. 'He flies in, makes a load of noise, kisses our hands and then flies off again. You never even have a chance to get a word in. Oh, Mother of God! I'm just wasting away here for no good reason thanks to that featherbrain.'

I had already heard about Gronsky from Chemodanov. An actor with the Warsaw Comedy Theatre, Gronsky was a gallant and brave officer with many good qualities, but frivolous in the extreme. In light of this, and his diminutive stature, he was known as the 'Little Knight'.

'You'll see for yourself,' said Chemodanov. 'It's like he sprang from the pages of a Sienkiewicz novel.'

I washed after my journey, drank some coffee with Pani Jadwiga, the old nurse, and lay down on a camp bed. I didn't feel like sleeping. I found a tattered copy of Sarcey's *The Siege of Paris*[1] on the windowsill and started to read. The wind rustled the vine leaves outside the window. Suddenly, a car, its engine backfiring wildly, drove up to the house. Someone jumped out, raced up the stairs, spurs clanking, and threw open the door. I saw a little man in uniform with joyful eyes, an enormous nose worthy of Cyrano de Bergerac and a bushy brown moustache.

'My child!' he cried in a high-pitched voice and threw himself onto the bed.

I just barely had time to get out of the way.

'My child! I'm overjoyed! We've been waiting for you like manna from heaven. Romanin has been pining.'

Gronsky embraced me firmly and kissed me three times. There was the faint smell of violets on his moustache.

'Wait!' he cried, then raced to the window, stuck out his head and called down: 'Pani Jadwiga! Hello! I've got good news. I've finally put together the perfect unit for you. Nothing but choirboys, all of them. What?! Would I lie to you?' Gronsky raised his right hand to the sky: 'Before Our Lord God and His Most Holy Son Jesus, I do swear that I shall rush you there tomorrow in this rickety Ford! All three of us will go.'

Pulling his head back in, he shouted: 'Artemenko, come here!'

An orderly attached to the base rushed into the room, his boots making a thundering noise.

'Let me look at your open, honest face,' said Gronsky.

Ashamed, Artemenko tried to avoid Gronsky's stare.

'Where are the five tins of condensed milk? The ones that were under my bed?'

'I have no idea!' snapped Artemenko.

'You son of a bitch!' said Gronsky. 'Don't let it happen again. Or else you'll be court-martialled, which will be followed by a penal battalion, a sobbing wife and children ruined for life. Now get out of my sight!'

Artemenko scrambled to the door.

'Stop!' Gronsky roared. 'Bring me the box from the car. And don't break it, you clumsy oaf !'

Artemenko sprang from the room.

'My child, my son!' said Gronsky, taking me by the shoulders, giving me a good shake and then peering into my eyes. 'If only you knew how sorry I am for every single young man who ends up in this lunatic asylum, this bedlam, this inferno, this nest of lice, this damned meat grinder, this pandemonium we call war. But you can count on me. I'll see you won't come to any harm.'

Artemenko dragged a plywood box into the room. Gronsky kicked the lid with the tip of his polished boot. The lid flew off, but so did the sole of his boot.

'Please do help yourself !' said a polite yet saddened Gronsky, pointing at the box. There, tightly packed underneath some wax paper, lay stacks of chocolate bars.

Gronsky sat down on the bed, took off his boot and looked at it for a long time, a frown on his face.

‘Incredible!’ he said, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘That’s the third time in week I’ve torn the sole off. It must be some kind of portent! Artemenko! Where’re you hiding?’

‘Here, sir!’ snapped Artemenko, who was standing right next to him.

‘Take my boot to that genius of a cobbler Yakob Kur, the pock-marked scoundrel. Tell him it had better be ready in an hour. Or else I’ll hop over there myself in one boot and shred his rotten hovel with my sword and make him dance to the tambourine.’

Artemenko snatched the boot and dashed off.

‘Well?’ asked Gronsky, ‘has Pani Jadwiga pecked a hole in your head yet? The old bird. May the Good Lord give her a hundred kicks in the backside! What am I supposed to do with her? One coarse word and she rolls her eyes and practically faints. Such a prissy little thing they’ve sent me. Let’s have some tea with brandy. What do you say? And tonight we’ll go to the concert at the officers’ mess. We’re off tomorrow at dawn. That’s assuming, of course, that my driver, His Excellency Pan Zvonkovoi, has fixed the engine.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘It got shot up. At the railway crossing near Lyubartov. No idea where the bullets came from. Ha ha! You’re reading Sarcey? I prefer Zola’s *L’Assommoir*. I like analytical writers. Balzac, for example. But I also love poetry.’ Gronsky pulled a small book from the pocket of his coat, waved it in the air and announced with true conviction: ‘*Yevgeny Onegin*! I’m never without it! Never! Worlds may crumble, but the glory of these lines shall live forever!’

Pan Gronsky was making my head spin. He looked at me carefully. I could see he was concerned.

‘My son! Lie down and take a little nap before the concert. I’ll wake you up.’

I was happy to lie down. Gronsky ran off downstairs. I could hear him washing himself over the basin, snorting and whistling ‘La Marseillaise’. Then he said something, apparently to Artemenko. ‘So tell me, do you know what it means to be “taken out behind the woodshed”? No? Well, then, I can certainly show you. It’s most interesting.’

Pani Jadwiga groaned. ‘Mother of God.’

Gronsky continued: ‘I may be just a worm, but nonetheless I’m going to bust that adjutant’s face. They can shoot me for all I care. It makes no difference to me!’

At this point I fell asleep. I was awakened by a loud twang as if a taut cable had been snapped in the room. The sun had gone down, and I could see a dark green sky through the open window. I lay there and listened. Pani Jadwiga was praying loudly, and then again the same loud twang of a snapping cable. A reddish light flickered in the sky, and from somewhere off in the twilight came the faint rumble of engines.

‘Get up!’ shouted Gronsky. ‘There’s a zeppelin over Brest!’

I jumped out of bed and ran to the balcony. Gronsky and Artemenko were there already, looking up at the sky.

‘Right there!’ said Gronsky, pointing. ‘Don’t you see it? Just a touch to the left of the Great Bear.’

Staring up, I saw a long dark shadow gliding swiftly across the sky. From nearby came the crackle of sporadic rifle fire. Shrapnel exploded in yellow flames over the house.

‘Not bad!’ said Gronsky. ‘If it goes on like this, we’ll get a bullet in the head from one of our own soldiers. The German has dropped his two bombs and is leaving. The show’s over. Let’s go. Our tea is ready.’

After tea Gronsky took me to the officers’ mess. It was a long wooden barn. The windows opened onto a garden and fresh air was pouring in. I was dead tired. Half asleep, I heard a rumbling bass voice: ‘At twelve o’clock midnight, the drummer arises from the grave . . .’[2]

I opened my eyes. A tall, clean-shaven officer with hair parted in the centre was singing.

‘He’s a famous singer,’ said Gronsky, but I had by then fallen back to sleep and never did remember his name. I slept through the entire concert.

We left in the morning. His Excellency Pan Zvonkovoi turned out to be a snub-nosed but kind metalworker from Penza. Listening to Gronsky’s stories, he would just grin and shake his head in amazement, saying ‘Well, well!’

I remember great mounds of sand, bombed-out roads and villagers frightened to within an inch of their lives. Crawling towards us, their wheels ploughing through deep sand, were carts loaded with refugees. We left Pani Jadwiga in one of the villages. It was towards evening when we finally reached the village of Vyshnitsa, where Romanin’s unit was based. The local commander’s black and yellow flag hung over a house made of cheap planks. The dust kicked up into the air by the carts and animals hung like a dry fog before slowly settling onto the ground.

Old Jews, the armbands of the provisional army police on their sleeves, ran from house to house

rounding up the villagers to go and dig trenches out beyond the village fence. The faint rumbling of an artillery duel could be heard in the distance.

It was a muggy, disturbing and chaotic night. Dozens of fires burned in the village square. Around the fires, next to their unharnessed wagons, refugees – Polish peasants – sat or lay about next to each other in rows. Exhausted mothers, their heads bare, cradled their babies, who were by now numb with hunger and turning blue. Dogs barked. Coachmen cursed as they tried to find a way through this human confusion. They lashed the people with their whips, drove their wheels over the peasants' mounds of clothing and household goods; embroidered towels, kerchiefs and shirts dragged along behind the wagons. Women, weeping, grabbed their possessions from under the wheels and took them to the fires. But their things were already torn, smeared with pitch and covered with dirt. Old Jewish women in red wigs came out of their hovels dragging the accumulated junk of a lifetime – quilts, crockery, old sewing machines, copper basins green with age – which they had bundled up in bedsheets and blankets. I looked about but there wasn't a single wagon or cart left to take them away.

Romanin's unit was billeted at an old inn on the edge of the village. Four enormous cast-iron kettles placed upon solid stands simmered on the trampled ground outside. Soldiers bustled around the kettles. Romanin was standing there shouting hoarsely at an officer whose hair was grey with dust. 'Go to hell!' Romanin yelled. He noticed Gronsky and me, waved, and then turned back to the officer. 'One of your cows drops dead every half-hour. You're just throwing their carcasses on the roads. So why are you being so stingy?'

'I need a written statement,' the officer complained. 'For every dead cow we write out a statement. I'm not about to risk a court martial because of you.'

'All right, damn you, let's go and write up a statement!' said Romanin, taking the officer by the arm and leading him into the inn. He turned around and smiled at me: 'I'll be right there. I just have to finish up this ridiculous business with this cattle merchant.'

We followed him into the inn. It was empty and reeked of stale smoke. Upon seeing us, the cockroaches began scattering along the walls.

'Have a smoke,' Gronsky said, 'in a minute you'll be getting down to work. You can see what's going on here. I'm going to give this commander of cows a good talking to.'

I sat down on a rickety bench and lit a cigarette. I could hear the women outside weeping and pleading with the soldiers for something. Cows bellowed, as if in pain, and the sound of the distant gunfire intensified. With every explosion sand trickled from a crack in the ceiling onto a hunk of black bread on the table. I pushed the bread out of the way. Three voices were now arguing on the other side of a partition. Romanin roared, the officer made an effort to fight back, and Gronsky shouted in an exasperated sing-song tenor.

'Give me two cows and you'll have your statement,' screamed Romanin. 'Basta! I've got nothing to feed these people. *Peo-ple*, human beings, get it?! Children are dying like flies, and you're worried about a scrap of paper. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Captain!'

All was quiet behind the partition. Out came Romanin. 'Wonderful,' he said in a hoarse voice and then kissed me on the cheeks. 'Right on time. I just managed to prevail over that fool. I got two cows from him. We need to slaughter one straight away, cut up the carcass and boil it in the kettles. Go and get some of the other orderlies to help. We don't have time to let the flesh hang. The refugees haven't eaten for two days.'

Romanin raised the greasy window curtain and looked out. 'Just look at that!' he said. 'I don't think I've slept in five days, but that's nothing. Get to work. We'll find some time to talk later.'

Gronsky had already told me on the way that since the Poles had been forced to pack up and flee, some of the field medical units, including ours, would be ordered to feed and care for the refugees. Nonetheless, I still had no idea what this meant.

'Don't ask anyone about what needs to be done,' Romanin told me. 'Just do what you think's right. And to hell with your tact and politeness! They'll get us nowhere and will cost dozens of lives.'

Romanin gave me two orderlies. We slaughtered the cow by the light of a bonfire in the inn's yard. Its dry horns lay sticking out of the ground. The blood oozed and puddled around us. There was too much of it for the dusty earth to absorb. The three of us hacked the carcass into large pieces. I had rolled up the sleeves of my new soldier's tunic, but still they were drenched with blood. We cut up the meat and hung it on a fence to let it dry a little. The clouds of dust grew thicker and thicker. The light from the bonfires became dim orange blurs. Then the old glass windows of the inn began to jingle and the whole house shook and danced.

Gronsky came out into the yard. 'Farewell, my son,' he said, and then grabbed me by my bloodied sleeves and gave me a kiss. 'I'm off to the Third Unit. Things are bad there.'

‘What’s that rattling?’ I asked. ‘More carts?’

‘Those aren’t carts, that’s our artillery falling back,’ said Gronsky. ‘Well, farewell! And good luck! Don’t hold up the food, my child, that’d be dangerous.’

He kissed me again, turned and left the yard. His head was bowed, as if something were weighing on him.

We dropped the meat into the kettles. Grey scum bubbled up to the surface. We skimmed it off with large spoons and dumped it on the ground. Starving, angry dogs licked the greasy dust. The soup, if I can call it that, was ready in the early hours of the morning, and we began to pass it out to the refugees. Hundreds of shaking hands stretched out to us, holding mugs, old bowls, cups and saucers. The women, once they had received their serving, tried to kiss our hands.

The sound of crying, indistinguishable from laughter (and perhaps it really was laughter, the laughter of all those famished people, overjoyed by the smell of that hot beef), hung over the crowd. They drank the soup at once, burning their lips and mumbling. In ten minutes the kettles were empty. Romanin ordered us to fill them up again immediately.

We slaughtered the second cow and hung the meat to dry. Again, the fresh meat was soon covered by a black layer of dust and clouds of flies appeared in the dark from out of nowhere. Again, children cried, and drivers cursed in hoarse voices as they clattered past. And again, it rumbled in the distance, but not as far off as the evening before, considerably closer now.

It was almost dawn when we fed the second group of refugees. Romanin ordered us to hurry up and move on. Some of the refugees left, some remained. The dawn was misty, the sky a dull red, and the air smelled of something burning. Columns of black smoke rose along the horizon. The orderlies said the crops had been set on fire. A Cossack patrol galloped into the village and stopped in the square near the synagogue. They ran in and out of two or three houses and then galloped off. Smoke began pouring from the houses. Soon flames leapt skyward from the roofs and people screamed. A shower of sparks fell on the sleeping children. The refugees’ rags began to smoulder. The women grabbed their children and, leaving everything, rushed to the fields. The menfolk followed them.

We made our way out of the village through the smoke and fire. Our horses snorted and shied at the chaos.

‘Head back towards Pishchats and Terespol,’ said Romanin. ‘I’ll go on ahead and secure billets. Follow the ambulances and stick to the back roads. The main roads are all jammed. If you don’t find me in Pishchats, go straight on to Terespol. Okay then, so long!’

We kissed each other goodbye, and Romanin said, ‘This is no *Portugal*.’ He patted me on the shoulder, then grabbed the pommel, hopped on one foot, threw his leg over his horse before landing heavily in the saddle, and galloped off along the side of the road.

We travelled all day along the back roads. I often had to check our maps. Fires were burning all around us, and we were enveloped in smoke that swirled and billowed as it drifted to the east. It seemed to me that the only peaceful sound I heard the whole day was the rustling of the willows over a shallow stream where we had stopped to water the horses. We passed the refugees. Then we were passed by a string of carts and artillery. The name ‘Mackensen’ was heard spoken more and more often. The German army under this field marshal was attacking not far behind us.

Twice we stopped to bury dead bodies abandoned by the roadside. One of them was a child. He was lying on a checked kerchief that his mother had apparently taken off her head. Someone had torn up some winter cress by the roots and placed it upon the child’s breast. The other one was a young peasant woman. Her light- coloured eyes were still open, and she looked up peacefully into the sky where a yellow sun shone through the smoke. A bee, entangled in the woman’s hair, buzzed angrily. It must have been there a long time, unable to find its way out.

After we had travelled a good distance from the fresh graves, a quiet, lanky orderly named Spolokh said to me: ‘That woman we buried, sir, I think it was that baby’s mother.’

‘Why?’

‘She wasn’t wearing a kerchief. It was with the baby. So it seems to me that must have been the mother.’

‘War . . . she’s a mother to some, and the devil to others,’ said Gladyshchev, a thickset orderly, unexpectedly.

I had been riding all day and was tired. My teeth were gritty with sand. I thought of nothing, nothing except for one thing that I couldn’t forget, namely that I had just buried two people and I didn’t even know their names. I kept recalling the faint, pale down on the woman’s arms and the baby’s smooth, round forehead.

Whose fault was it that death had chosen them – that it had come to their little village, where the

periwinkles were still in blossom and where, perhaps, the smell of warm bread still lingered in the peasant huts, to drive them from their homes, hurrying and in tears, and to finish them off in a strange land, in thick sand, on a highway, where the metal-rimmed wheels of carts creaked by just inches from their eternally resting faces?

'Sir!' Spolokh said.

'What is it?'

'You should forget about it, that's the best thing. Listen to me, take my advice. I've had a year of this war.'

'How'd you know I was thinking about it?'

'It's obvious. Your face gives it away.'

It was hard to believe that only yesterday I had still been in peaceful Brest, had drunk coffee at that little table with the old nurse, listened to talkative Gronsky, slept in a soft bed and breathed the fresh night air.

We arrived in Pishchats at dusk – the sand had held us up. Romanin wasn't there. Mountains of old household wares and torn books littered the streets. I picked up a few of the books, looked at them and then threw them back. They were written in incomprehensible ancient Hebrew.

The village was deserted. Only some cats were left, crouching and then leaping from door to door. We stopped to rest in what had once been a barber's shop. There was a sign hanging over the glass door and its jingling bell. It depicted a rosy-cheeked dandy with a black moustache, wrapped in a snow-white towel and seated in a chair, his legs in high-heeled boots stretched out in front of him. One half of his face was lathered. All by itself, without the aid of a human hand, an enormous razor hung threateningly in the air inches from this dandy's lathered cheek. The dandy smiled happily. 'Viennese Barber Shop. Isaak Moses and Grandson' read the sign.

Inside, the floorboards were loose. The shop's only mirror, cracked and splattered with dried soap bubbles, swayed with every step we took. There was the faint smell of eau-de-Cologne. On a small, three-legged bamboo table lay some dirty, tattered copies of *Little Fire*, *World Panorama* and *Argus*. Dazed flies buzzed against the windows. We made ourselves some tea and gruel. I wasn't feeling sleepy. I felt like sitting in the barber's chair, leaning back onto its worn velvet headrest, shutting my eyes and thinking. Of what? Of the endless murmur of the sea and the noise of the cicadas in the dry mountains. Of large yellow leaves drifting down from the plane trees on an autumn evening in Alushta. Of a happy girl rushing to meet me. Of poetry. And God knows what else, all manner of things equally distant from the war and equally vague.

But we had to move on. Again the stench of horse sweat, the shouting, the creaking wheels, the hard saddle, and then the sand, ever more sand. Only now, instead of tall plumes of billowing smoke behind us, we could see the crimson glow of fires and, off to one side, the brilliant glitter of stars. Yet the same metal growl of the guns continued to roll over the earth – the barren thunder of war, the voice of Krupp's guns, made for no other purpose than to rip human bodies to pieces.

Again I began to doze, and I thought I saw shooting stars streaking across the dark sky, as if heaven had sent its scouts to earth to discover what the heirs of those great Germans Leibniz, Humboldt and Herschel were up to. That afternoon we arrived, at last, in Terespol.

[1] *Reflections on the Siege of Paris during the Franco–Prussian War* (1871), by Francisque Sarcey (1827–99).

[2] Opening lines of 'The Nighttime Review' (1836) by Vasily Zhukovsky (1783–1852).

56

Two Thousand Volumes

I found Romanin in the home of the village priest. The dark wooden house was set back in a garden, largely hidden behind thick clumps of nettles and celandine. Here and there a few crimson hollyhocks poked out among the weeds. The priest had not left Terespol with the refugees. He came out onto the porch along with Romanin to greet me. He was thin and tall and had lively eyes. His boots, turned a reddish brown from wear, showed beneath his old cassock. The priest blessed me, according to the custom of the times, and said in Russian: 'My house is open to everyone. Just like the house of God. Come in, my son. Make yourself at home.' He had a high-pitched childlike voice.

We went in. The windowpanes rattled as we walked. The priest opened the door of a gloomy, low-ceilinged room. The walls were lined with wooden shelves holding hundreds of books.

'I don't want to see the Germans!' said the priest all of sudden, stopping in the doorway. He raised his large hands over his head, as if he were warding off an apparition. 'May the Virgin Mary save me from them! I don't want to lay my eyes on a single Prussian. Cursed be the vile night he was conceived on some filthy mattress under a portrait of Chancellor Bismarck!'

Romanin nudged me, but I didn't understand what he was trying to warn me about.

'The chancellor watched every one of these acts with his bulging eyes,' the priest went on, 'and said: "*Ach, mein Gott!* Here's yet one more fine little soldier for the *Vaterland*. *Ach, mein Gott*, how good it is of you to send Germany all these ginger-haired lads."'

The priest walked slowly around the room, running a hand over the spines of the books. It was as if he were counting them. Then he quickly turned and said to us in Polish: 'I've been collecting these books all my life. Two thousand volumes of history. I wanted to save them, but where would I ever get enough carts? And so, you see, I've remained behind with them. You're welcome to read them, any book you like, but I see you are very tired. Go and rest.'

The priest patted my shoulder with a dry, withered hand and went out, his cassock swishing.

'He's really something, no?' Romanin asked. 'We've become friends. What doesn't he have here! Look – here's a whole shelf devoted to Suvorov. And over here, Napoleon. Up there, the Middle Ages and the Church Fathers. '

I reached for a thick volume in a cracked black leather binding. It was Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution*.

'We're off to Brest tomorrow at dawn,' said Romanin, 'and all this will be destroyed! All these books, along with their eccentric owner. Go and clean yourself up. You're filthy. There's a little *banya* in the garden. It's good and hot.'

I went off to the *banya*. The steam bath was nothing more than a crooked little shack surrounded by nettles that had grown as tall as the eaves. The boiler was full of warm, muddy water. I picked up some rotten wood off the floor – bits of boards from an old fence – shoved it under the boiler and lit it. Damp air from the approaching evening streamed in through a broken window.

I got undressed and was amazed at how weighed down my clothes and boots were with dust. I sat for a long time on the bench, smoking, my mind blank, waiting for the water to heat up. I felt good here, alone in this brief lull of solitude, the fresh air drifting in from the garden. Midges danced in the pale shafts of sunlight. Tall weeds with white, umbrella-shaped flowers stood just outside the windows. It was so still I could hear the horses snorting in the garden where we had tethered them to some trees. Then from far off there came a slow rumbling that rolled over the roof of the *banya* and died away in the west.

A grey tomcat jumped up onto the sill, looked at me and miaowed with surprise. Next he walked around the walls of the entire *banya* before stopping to peer inside my dark, empty boots. He miaowed again, but this time as if asking for something, and began to rub himself against my legs. I could almost hear the sound his thick fur made. I stroked him. The cat purred with pleasure.

'You've found a nice little spot for yourself far from the front!' I said to the cat. 'No one's going to bother you here. No men in steel helmets will for some unknown reason hunt you down and try to kill you. How about we switch places?'

He pretended he hadn't been listening to my words, and then slowly sauntered out of the *banya*

without even bothering to look back.

'You little pig!' I said as he left. 'Selfish little pig!'

I so wanted him to come back. I needed the presence of a living creature who had no idea of war and who thought that the world was just as good as it had been a month or a year ago, with the same butterflies fluttering about in the garden, the same quiet calm of a village sunset, and the same worn armchair in which to doze and then be awakened by a mysterious crackling emanating from the dry bindings on the shelves. I was exhausted, my mind a mess of thoughts and feelings. I wanted to clear my head and to be able to finally think for a moment of what had long been missing from my life – a bit of tenderness or a warm shoulder to lean on.

'Mama,' I said softly to myself, but immediately remembered her dry, tightly pressed lips and her worried face. No, she could not help me. But who then? I had lost Lëlya as well, and I'd never see her again. I had no one. Perhaps in the future, if there was to be one, I might meet someone with a kind soul.

Once more a slow, rumbling echo rolled across the roof. Jackdaws exploded from the elms around the house, cawing wildly as they flew. Romanin came up to the window.

'What happened? Did you fall asleep?' he asked. 'The priest has found some cherry jam.'

'I must have dozed off,' I said.

'You don't look good,' said Romanin. 'What's the matter? Hurry up and come in to tea.'

The church's verger – an old man in a peasant coat – was laying out tea in the library. He had covered the round table with a cloth and set out a few glasses and a sugar bowl of thick, smoky glass. The cherry jam, as bright and red as a pomegranate, stood out against this dull background. We pulled out our provisions – tinned meat, hard tack and cranberry juice. That was all we had. The cat sauntered in. His name was Beelzebub. We invited the priest to the table. We all stood listening while he mumbled a brief blessing.

'You have good manners, young men,' he said with a smile.

We sat down.

'May God's blessings be upon you,' he said. 'May the Blessed Virgin watch over your every step. You don't believe in her, of course. But that's no matter! May she watch over you and stay the hand of the enemy.'

The priest moved his glass aside and turned to the verger, who was drinking his tea. 'Janosz,' he said, 'go and unlock the church. We'll pray through the night and tomorrow as well.'

'Yes, Father,' the verger replied softly and rose from the table. 'Through the night and tomorrow as well.'

'We shall pray for the souls of the men killed in the war.'

'Yes, Father,' the verger repeated in a low voice, 'we shall pray for the souls of the men killed in the war.'

'And then we shall celebrate a Mass for Poland, that she may rise from the ashes like the phoenix.'

'Yes, Father, like the phoenix from the ashes.'

'Amen!' said the priest.

'Amen!' mumbled the verger, lowering his head.

The incantations of the priest together with the mumblings of the verger had made Romanin and me uncomfortable. The priest somehow noticed. He got up without saying a word and walked out. The verger limped after him.

I lay down on a couch covered with a black oilcloth, pulled my greatcoat over me and sank into a susurrating darkness. I woke up with a start. It seemed to be late at night. Through the open window I could hear soft noises coming from the dark of the garden, and then all was quiet again. Clouds had apparently rolled in, and the sky was black, devoid of stars and moon.

I was in the embrace of a deep silence, yet I was certain I had been woken by some sound. I lay there, waiting for its certain return. I wanted a cigarette but held off lighting a match for fear of disturbing the safe darkness of the night. I kept waiting. The longer I waited, the more I began to fear this still unknown sound.

I lay like this for a few minutes and then sat up with a jerk. My greatcoat fell to the floor with a long, heavy swoosh. The sound came back – jangling, drawn out, oppressive and terrifying, like some horrible cry. What was it? The sound reverberated for a long time, but just as it was dying away there came another, and then I recognised the measured tolling of the church bells. The priest was offering his solemn litany for the dead. I reached for my packet of cigarettes on the chair, but at that moment something whistled over the roof, followed by a crimson flame, the thud of an explosion and then a strange noise as if little stones were raining down on a cobbled street. Romanin jumped up and lit a candle. Another whistle overhead and another explosion, this one lighting up the entire garden.

‘We’re under attack!’ shouted Romanin. ‘Get dressed and then saddle the horses. I’ll see to the carts.’

Already dressed, I took an electric torch and went out into the garden. The horses had their ears pinned back and were straining at the ropes to free themselves. The other orderlies were by now awake and calling to each other. The edge of the village was in flames, and this light made it easier for us to get ready.

We hurried. The infantry was retreating in ragged groups through the village. As we drove past the church, I saw its doors had been thrown wide open. The light from the candles was dazzling. Apparently, the verger had lit every last one they had. A large crucifix loomed over the altar. The priest stood in his surplice on the steps of the church. He held a black cross high over his head. His battered old boots showed beneath his cassock. The verger stood behind him. When we had pulled even with him, the priest blessed us with the cross and called out loudly: ‘May the Holy Virgin, the Lily of the Heavens, the Mother of all Sufferers, protect and keep you!’

The flickering light from the burning village landed on the priest’s face and lacy surplice in such a way that it appeared he was smiling.

We left the village behind us. The gunfire died down. Dust from the horses and the wet smell of the bogs hung in the air. Off in the distance the cracked bell of the church was tolling again.

‘He’s bit off his rocker, I guess,’ said Romanin.

Ignoring him, I turned up the collar of my greatcoat and lit a cigarette. I was frozen to the bone. All I could think about was trying to get warm.

57

The Village of Kobrin

We left Brest for the village of Kobrin. Pan Gronsky went with us in his scratched and battered Ford. Brest was in flames. They were blowing up the fortress. The sky was thick with pinkish smoke.

Outside Brest we picked up two children who had lost their mother. They had been standing on the side of the road, clinging to each other – a little boy in a torn school coat and a skinny girl of twelve. The boy had pulled down the peak of his cap to hide his tears. The girl held him tight, her arms around his shoulders. We made room for them in our wagons and covered them with old coats. A biting rain began to fall.

We arrived in Kobrin in the evening. The retreating army had trampled the coal-black earth into thick mud. The wet muck reached up to the doorsteps of the crooked little houses with their rotting, slanted roofs. Horses neighed in the darkness, lanterns cast a dim light, wobbling cartwheels clanked and rain poured from the roofs in noisy streams.

In Kobrin we saw how what they call a *tsaddik*, a Jewish holy man, was being taken from the village. Gronsky told us that there were several of these *tsaddiks* in the western borderlands and Poland. They always lived in small villages. Hundreds of people from all over the country came to consult with them about their troubles. The villages lived off these visitors.

A crowd of agitated women had gathered around a low-slung wooden house. A covered wagon, drawn by four emaciated horses, stood by the door. I had never seen such an ancient contraption. Several dragoons stood around smoking. They were apparently to accompany the *tsaddik* for protection along the way. Suddenly, the crowd let out a cry and ran towards the door. The door flew open, and an enormously tall Jew, bristling with black whiskers, stepped out carrying, like a baby in his arms, a completely withered-up old man with a snowy beard wrapped in a blue coverlet. A few old women in long cloaks and pale youths in caps and frock coats hurried after the *tsaddik*. He was laid in the wagon, the old women and youths climbed in, the commander ordered the dragoons to mount, and the wagon set in motion, swaying and creaking through the mud. The crowd of women ran behind it.

'Did you know a *tsaddik* never leaves his home for his entire life?' said Gronsky. 'Honest to God! And he's fed by hand with little spoons. On the word of a *hakham*!'

In Kobrin we were billeted in a damp, old synagogue. It was empty except for one man sitting in the dark and muttering what must have been either prayers or curses. We lit our lanterns and saw an elderly Jew with sad, suspicious eyes.

'Oy, oy, oy, dear soldiers!' he said. 'What great happiness you've brought us poor people.'

We just stood there, sullen and silent. The orderlies had found a piece of sheet metal in the courtyard and dragged it inside. We lit a fire on it and put on a kettle to make tea. The two children sat in silence by the fire. Gronsky walked in, the leather straps of his uniform squeaking, and said: 'My friends, unharness the horses. To hell with it! I'm not moving any farther until dawn. The whole army's pushing through the village now – we'd be ground to dust. Find those children something to eat.'

He looked at the children for a long time, and the flames from the fire reflected in his eyes. Then he spoke to the girl in Polish. She answered him in a whisper, not raising her eyes.

'When will this all be over?' Gronsky asked, out of the blue. 'When will we finally get our hands around the necks of the dogs who started this bloody mess?'

Gronsky swore. No one said a word. Then the old Jew stood up. He approached Gronsky, bowed and asked: 'Dear sir, do you happen to know who benefits from this misfortune?'

'I don't. Nor do you, old man!' replied Gronsky. 'Nor do these children, nor any of these people here.'

Sparks flew in the darkness outside the windows; the field kitchens were driving past the synagogue. 'To the kettles, all of you. Get some soup!' said Gronsky. We went over to the kettles set up by the soldiers. The little boy came with us. Orderly Spolokh held him firmly by the hand.

A crowd of hungry refugees was trying to get to the kettles. The soldiers held them back. Torches swung in the dark and seemed to catch nothing but eyes – the glazed, bulging eyes of people who could see only the steaming kettles. This crowd was more desperate than the one back in Vyshnitsa.

'Let me go!' someone yelled.

The crowd lunged forward. It tore the little boy from Spolokh's hand. He stumbled and fell under the feet of several hundred people hurling themselves towards the kettles. He didn't even have a chance to cry out. Men tore the bowls from each other's hands. Women hurriedly stuffed bits of hot, waxen pork into their starving babies' mouths. Spolokh and I threw ourselves towards the boy, but the crowd thrust us back. I was unable to shout. A spasm gripped my throat. I pulled out my revolver and fired in the air. The crowd drew back. The boy lay in the mud. There were tears on his pale, dead cheeks. We picked him up and carried him to the synagogue.

Spolokh cursed. 'Well, just wait . . . just wait. Give us a moment to draw our strength, and then we'll make them pay for this,' he said.

We brought him in and laid the body down on a greatcoat. The girl saw him and got up. She shook so hard we could hear her teeth chatter. 'Mama!' she whispered, backing towards the doors. 'Oh, Mama!' she cried and ran out into the street.

Convoys were rumbling by.

'Mama!' we heard her wail from outside.

We stood there frozen, until Gronsky shouted at us: 'Go and get her, now! Move, damn you!'

Romanin and the orderlies dashed out into the street. I ran after them. The girl had vanished. I untethered my horse, jumped on and rode into the thick of the carts, whipping at the sweaty horses to clear a way through. I galloped down the street, then rode back and stopped some soldiers to ask whether they had seen a girl in a grey coat. They didn't even bother to answer me.

Wooden shacks on the edge of town had been set on fire. The glow flickered in the puddles, intensifying the chaotic impression of carts, guns, horses and wagons, that confused mass of a nighttime retreat. I returned to the synagogue. The girl was not there. The boy lay on the coat as though asleep, his cheek pressed against the wet cloth. The fire was dying, and I didn't find anyone in the damp, dark synagogue other than the elderly Jew who sat beside the boy and was still muttering his prayers or his curses.

'Where is everyone?' I asked him.

'How should I know?' he answered with a sigh. 'Everyone wants some hot soup.' He paused for a moment and then went on in a low, clear voice: 'Sir, I am a saddle maker. My name is Josef Schifrin. I don't know how to say what is in my heart. Sir, we Jews know from our Prophets that God punishes the wicked. But where is He, our God? Why did He not rip out the eyes of the men responsible for this misfortune? Why did He not smite them with fire?'

'God? What's God got to do with it?' I said rudely. 'You talk like a stupid old man.'

He gave me a sad smile. 'Listen,' he said and touched the sleeve of my coat. 'Listen, you are intelligent and educated.'

He paused again. A steady glow shone through the synagogue's dusty windows.

'I've been sitting here, thinking. I don't know as well as you who exactly is responsible for all this. I didn't go to school. I didn't even go to the *cheder*. But I'm not completely blind, and I do see a few things. And so, I ask you, sir, who will make them pay? Who will make them pay, and pay dearly, for this little boy? Or are you all so kind and good that you'll pity and forgive them – those people who gave us this nice little present, who gave us this war? Oh, my God, when will people finally come together and make a decent life for themselves?'

He stretched his arms up towards the ceiling of the synagogue, closed his eyes and, swaying back and forth, let out a piercing cry. 'Where is the man who will avenge us? I don't see the man who will dry the tears of the suffering and give milk to the mothers whose babies suckle at their empty breasts. Where is he who will sow the fields with grain for the hungry? Where is he who will take the gold from the rich and give it to the poor? May those who stain men's hands with blood and rob the poor be cursed until the end of the time! May they have no children, no grandchildren! May their seed rot and their own spittle turn to poison in their mouths. May the air they breathe turn to sulphur and the water they drink to boiling tar! May the blood of this child poison the bread of the rich and may they choke on it and die in anguish like tormented dogs!'

The old man was screaming. He held out his balled fists and shook them at the ceiling. His voice thundered through the synagogue.

I was terrified and went out. Leaning back against the wall of the synagogue, I lit a cigarette. It was drizzling, and the black of the night was slowly settling upon the ground. The darkness seemed to deliberately shut me in with my thoughts about the war. One thing was clear to me: no matter what, we had to put an end to it. We had to use all our strength and every last drop of our blood to bring peace and justice at long last to this desecrated, beggared earth.

58

Treason

In Kobrin an order arrived to move north, and so we immediately set out for the small village of Pruzhany near the Belovezha Forest. Along the way we passed endless fields, now untilled and overgrown with wild mustard. The ruins of Brest still smouldered to the south-west. In a field near Pruzhany we saw a gun with a burst barrel and stopped. A group of soldiers in crusty field coats sat around the gun. Some were smoking, others winding their puttees, and a few were sitting about doing nothing and looked at us with blank stares. I rode over to them.

'What's this?' I asked a bearded soldier as I pointed to the gun. The soldier was lying back against the wheel of the gun-carriage and smoking. He gave me a brief look and said nothing.

'What is this?' I asked again.

'Since when do I report to the likes of you?' the soldier snapped back. 'You're no officer. Blind, are you? It's a gun!'

'Why's the barrel broken?'

The man shrugged and turned away. A young soldier missing his hat answered for him. 'What are you pestering us for?' he said in a whiny voice. His blond hair had been cropped so close that his head shone like a glass ball. 'You lot don't give us a minute's rest. It's enough to make you want to go and drown yourself.'

'What's he asking about?' yelled a soldier with a greenish face. He was squatting on his heels and scraping dirt off a biscuit with a twig. 'What's wrong with him? Can't he see for himself what's happened to the gun? It's treason – that's what it is!'

'Treason!' the bearded soldier repeated hoarsely, sitting up and flinging away his cigarette. He clenched his black fist and shook it at the east where the wind was bending the thin willows. 'Treason! Cursed be their god, their mothers and their souls! The artillery runs ahead of supplies, and so there are no shells. The ones there are explode in the barrels. Cartridges too, nothing. So, what are we fools supposed to fight the Germans with?'

'Treason!' several voices muttered. 'Can't be anything else.'

Our wagons set in motion. I rode off.

It was there, on the front, that I first heard that awful word – 'treason'. Soon it could be heard throughout the entire army and then the whole country. Some whispered it, others roared it at the top of their lungs. Everyone said it, from infantrymen to generals. Even the wounded, when asked what had happened to them, angrily replied: 'Treason!'

There was more and more talk about War Minister Sukhomlinov. It was said he had been accepting enormous bribes from the arms manufacturers who supplied the army with dud shells. It wasn't long before the rumours reached the top, and Empress 'Alix of Hesse' was openly charged with heading a German spy network in Russia. The indignation grew. And still there were no shells. The army pulled back to the east, unable to stop the enemy.

•

We were travelling across the southern part of the province of Grodno, feeding the refugees, sending them to the rear, picking up the sick and taking them to hospitals. It began to rain hard. Large puddles of frothy yellow water formed along the roads. The rain itself seemed as yellow as horses' piss. We couldn't dry out and before long we began to smell like wet dogs in our greatcoats. The wind howled incessantly in the bushes along the roadsides and snapped the twigs like whips.

Like a hungry man with a bone, the retreating army had picked the small towns on the way – Pruzhany, Ruzhany, Slonim – bare. Nothing was left in the shops, except for some ink and carpenter's glue. 'They've cleaned us out,' the frightened Jewish shopkeepers complained.

Romanin and I hardly spoke anymore. His face, now shrouded under his forage cap, which he kept permanently strapped down low against the wind, looked harsh and angular. Pan Gronsky was always off somewhere in his dilapidated Ford in search of food for us. He returned seldom, unkempt, rumpled and

exhausted, large bags under his eyes. He'd let his moustache grow and it now covered his mouth. It made him look like an old man. Every time he came back, he took me aside by the arm and told me in a confidential whisper: 'It's nothing! Don't worry, dear boy! When this hell of a war's over, we'll head straight to Petrograd and toss that halfwit off the throne and feed him and all his Hessians to the damned pigs. And Poland will rise again. As God is my witness! A nation that produced the likes of Mickiewicz, Chopin and Słowacki[1] can never die! The best people of Poland will gather around their memory, like soldiers around a campfire, and they'll swear to die or make her free.'

Each time he told me the same thing, in the exact same words, as if he were obsessed. I didn't know whether he was exhausted or insane. His eyes burned feverishly, and he gripped my arm so tightly that I nearly screamed from the pain. I had heard somewhere that the insane often possessed enormous strength.

I confided my fears to Romanin. He gave me a sharp look and said with spite: 'Can you really tell who's sane and who's insane? Well, can you? No? Well, then keep your damned notions to yourself ! I couldn't care less. Maybe I'm mad myself.'

I had never before seen Romanin so angry.

'Why don't you lock up that beast of yours,' I said, trying my best to keep calm.

He gave me an odd grin, grabbed me tightly by the shoulder, but then pushed me away and walked off. That was in Slonim, in a small shop that had until just recently sold paraffin. There were still puddles of it on the scattered sheets of metal covering the floor. There was nowhere to sit. I leaned against the wall, smoked a cigarette and then followed Romanin outside.

Our unit was already on the move. Rain poured off the men's oil-skin cloaks. Bedraggled crows descended out of the sky, landed on the rotten rooftops, and then opened their beaks as if to caw. But no sound came out, almost as if they had realised it was pointless. You can't stop the rain by cawing.

[1] Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49), Romantic poet and dramatist.

59

In the Marshy Woods

Beyond Slonim lay vast, monotonous wooded marshlands. Row after row of thin silvery aspens stood partly veiled behind a fine, bleak shroud of rain. In the afternoon the sky finally cleared. It was green and cold. A biting wind chased dark, ragged clouds. Romanin rode at the head of the column, I at the back. I saw a young Belorussian peasant in sandals walk out of the woods. He removed his cap, caught hold of Romanin's stirrup, walked along beside his horse, and seemed to be humbly pleading for something. Tears shone in his eyes.

Romanin stopped and called me over. 'Over there in the woods,' he said without looking at me, 'a refugee is giving birth. It's this man's wife. Everyone's gone and it's just the two of them. He says his wife's in trouble.'

'Sir, she's in terrible pain,' said the peasant, wiping his eyes with his cap.

Romanin was quiet.

'Go and deliver the baby,' he said, fidgeting with his bridle and still refusing to look at me. 'None of us know how, including you, but at least you've got clever hands, and that's worth something.'

Something in his voice made me think he was making fun of me. I felt the blood drain from my face. 'All right,' I said, trying to control myself.

'We'll wait for you in Baranovichi.' Romanin offered me his wet hand. 'Need an orderly?'

'I don't need no damned orderly,' I said.

I took our bag of medicines and a simple surgical instrument – the only one we had – and turned off along the forest track.

The peasant – his name was Vasil – ran alongside, holding onto my stirrup. Mud from my horse's hooves splattered his face. He kept wiping it off with his wet cap. I trotted on at a good pace. I tried not to think about what was happening. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes fixed straight ahead. I was terrified. Never in my life had I been anywhere near a woman in labour. Suddenly I heard an angry wail and pulled up. Someone was crying very close by.

'Sir, hurry!' said Vasil, now beside himself with worry.

I whipped my horse and crashed through a thicket of hazel. Vasil had let go of my stirrup and was soon far behind me. I came out in a small clearing. I saw a young boy, about the age of ten with a black cap pulled down over his ears, sitting next to a small, dying fire. Hugging his knees, he sat rocking back and forth and chanting softly in a dull monotone: 'Oy, Zosya! Oy, Zosya! Oy, Zosya!'

Smoke from the fire filled the clearing and hung in the low branches of the thicket, making it difficult to see. I dismounted. There was a cart on the other side of the fire with a woman on it. At first all I could make out was her distorted black face and huge white eyes. She was howling, her mouth stretched so wide it nearly split her lips. Her hands were dug in to the sides of the cart. One moment thrusting forward, the next throwing herself back, she howled and howled without stopping like some sort of animal. A mangy dog with chattering teeth lay under the cart. My heart froze. Then the cold rose to my head, and suddenly my fear vanished.

'Quick, stoke the fire!' I yelled at the boy.

The boy jumped up, stumbled, fell and then bolted into the trees for more wood. Vasil came running up. I had no idea what to do. I could only guess. First of all, I threw off my greatcoat and washed my hands. Vasil poured water on them from a pitcher. His hands were shaking so badly that most of the water missed. The boy came back with wood and got the fire going again. It was almost dark by now.

'Get the boy out of here,' I said to Vasil. 'He shouldn't see this.'

'But she's his sister,' Vasil replied in a hurry. 'There's a spring in the woods. He could go and fetch some water.'

'Yes, water, water!' I stammered. 'And a clean towel or some rags.'

'Zosya has two clean shirts,' said Vasil, trying to be helpful. 'Mikolaichik, run and fetch some water, I'll find the shirts.'

I had another sudden moment of doubt as I began to pull my tunic over my head. Everything became dark in an instant, and I stopped. I wanted to try to calm down and collect my thoughts. But what

thoughts? What was I thinking about? Nothing. I was aware of nothing other than despair.

I finally pulled myself together, slipped off my tunic, rolled up my shirtsleeves, pulled my electric torch from my pocket and handed it to Vasil. ‘Hold this!’

I walked over to the cart. It seems I went deaf from fear, for I no longer heard the woman’s screams, and I tried not to look at her. I saw something pink and pitiful. I quickly yet carefully reached out and took hold of it and then pulled hard. I didn’t know whether or not this was the right thing to do. It all happened as if in a dream. To this day I can’t recall if the baby came out then or only after more pulling. All I remember is the feel of its little shoulders, or what I think were shoulders. I squeezed them and carefully, yet forcefully pulled the baby towards me.

‘Sir!’ cried Vasil, grabbing me. ‘Sir!’

I was standing and swaying back and forth. Something warm and wet lay in my outstretched hands. Suddenly, this mysterious something sneezed.

Everything that needed to be done after this I did with more composure, although my head was still spinning. Vasil and I washed the baby and then we swaddled it tightly in towels and rags. I held the child in my arms, afraid to drop him. Vasil had dug his teeth into his coat sleeve and was shaking his head and sobbing. I snapped at him, approached the woman and carefully laid the baby down alongside her. She gave a slow, easy smile as she looked at her baby and then touched it ever so slightly with her thin, dark hand. This was her first child.

‘My dear little one,’ she cooed, ‘My light, my poor little son.’

Tears poured from her wide eyes. Just then, the woman grabbed my hand and pressed it to her hot, dry lips. I left it there so as not to upset her. Soon my hand was wet from her tears. The infant squirmed and mewed feebly, like a kitten. I took my hand away, and the woman reached for her baby and then shyly pulled out a breast.

Vasil had by now stopped crying and just stood there wiping his eyes with his sleeve. The boy squatted on his heels and stared at the fire with a happy expression on his face. A few gunshots crackled in the distance beyond the woods. I washed my hands, threw my coat over my shoulders and sat down by the fire. I gave Vasil a cigarette and then lit one for myself. Never before had I enjoyed a cigarette more than on that gloomy night.

My sense of relief didn’t last long. I was worried about the woman. I got up and went over to the cart. In the flickering light of the fire, I thought her face looked feverish. She appeared to be asleep, lying on her side and holding her baby to her breast. Her thick eyelashes cast a shadow on her cheeks.

I looked at the woman closely for the first time and was amazed by the happy and tender expression on her face. At the time I did not know that after childbirth, if only for a short while, women’s faces are almost always calm and beautiful. It must have been this beauty of motherhood that inspired the great painters of the Renaissance – Raphael, Leonardo, Botticelli – when they painted their Madonnas. I gently took the woman’s hand and felt her pulse. It was weak but steady.

Without opening in her eyes, the woman took my hand again and gently stroked it, as if in her sleep. But this time she was not trying to thank me but to reassure me. It was as if she were saying: ‘Don’t worry. I’m fine. Go and rest.’

How could I have imagined an hour ago as I rode along that muddy road, my heart empty, that someone would treat me so kindly this very night? Day after day of war dragged on like a night without shelter. I never could have believed that in the utter loneliness of that night I would be so soon, and so fleetingly, comforted by a smile of such human tenderness.

Brief crackles of gunfire erupted again beyond the woods along the dark horizon. It sounded as if they were chasing after each other.

‘Sir,’ Vasil called out to me, ‘the Germans are coming. What should we do?’

Against all common sense I felt strangely calm. ‘Nothing,’ I muttered. ‘We’ll stay here a few more hours. It would bad for her to be tossed about on the road.’

‘You won’t leave us, will you, sir?’

‘No, I won’t.’

Vasil calmed down and went to cook some gruel with the boy. I knew it was dangerous to stay in the woods. Given the sound of the gunfire, I could tell the Germans were close. Maybe they had broken through again, and when that happened, the front always crumbled, vanished or just melted away in an instant. But I simply did not want to leave.

I sat down by the cart and stared at the fire. Nothing makes time move faster than the sight of fire by night. I watched every last stick ignite, and the sparks flying from the dry kindling, and the flaming, grey ash. The woman’s breathing was quiet and steady. ‘No,’ I said to myself, ‘you can’t escape this war, no matter how much you want to. You’re not the only one in this world.’ I looked at my watch. I had been

staring at the fire for two hours.

'Time to get ready,' I told Vasil.

We had some of the gruel. Zosya woke up and Vasil fed her. She ate slowly and little and never took her eyes off the baby. Vasil kept trying to get her to eat, but she gently pushed him away: 'I don't want any.'

Dawn was a fair way off. Vasil harnessed the horses. We made Zosya as comfortable as we could, covered her with two sheepskin coats, and then the cart slowly headed out of the woods onto the main road. We were all alone. The wind blew. The pines made a mournful sound. The gunfire had died down.

I rode a few steps ahead and pointed my torch now and then at potholes and puddles so Vasil could avoid them. I knew from Romanin that we were a few kilometres from Baranovichi's old garrison camp. I hoped to find one of the retreating field hospital units still there and get them to take Zosya until she got her strength back. We were in luck. A field hospital had been using one of the wooden huts and was getting ready to pull out. We had arrived just in time.

I went to see the head doctor. He was sitting in an empty hut, drinking tea from a tin mug. An unshaven old man with the red eyes of a rabbit, he took off his glasses and listened to me without saying a word. One of the ties from his gown had dropped into his tea and got wet, and he sat there squeezing it as he heard me out.

'So you delivered the baby?' he asked and gave me a disapproving look.

'Yes.'

'You mean, just like that?'

'I had no choice,' I replied in my defence.

'No, there was nothing else you could do,' the doctor agreed, dipping a lump of sugar into his tea and popping it in his mouth. 'Although the baby seems to have come out on its own, so don't bother putting on airs, lieutenant.'

'I'm not putting on airs.'

'But you should. I would if I were you. Would you like some tea? You probably should, because that's all there is. We're leaving soon. For now put your refugee in the theatre. Tell the duty nurse I said so.'

'Theatre? What theatre?' I asked.

'The Imperial Opera House in Petrograd,' he said angrily. 'Don't be such a fool. There's a summer theatre here in the camp. Or rather there was. For the officers. Take her there.'

We carried Zosya over to the rotting hut that had served as a theatre. The duty nurse was nowhere to be found, so we laid Zosya down ourselves in a camp bed.

At the far end of the hut was a stage. It was hidden behind a torn canvas curtain crudely painted with a landscape of the Monk and the Devil's Gate at Simeiz. It was impossible to know why someone had chosen to depict such a landscape – with these rock formations, this bright, blueprint-blue sky and these black cypress trees – for this of all places.

'Where's the mother?' asked a female voice from outside.

I involuntarily moved away from the bed and into the shadows along the wall. I recognised Lëlya's voice.

She walked in quickly. As always, a strand of curly hair had escaped from under her scarf. Coming from the daylight into the dark barracks she couldn't immediately make out the woman on the bed or us men either.

'Who brought her here?' asked Lëlya.

'He's right here, the officer,' muttered Vasil, pointing at me with his cap.

Lëlya turned toward me.

'You?' she asked.

I came out of the shadows and approached her. 'Yes, Lëlya,' I said, 'I did.'

She turned white, stepped back, sat down on an empty bed and raised her frightened eyes at me. 'Oh my Lord,' she whispered. 'Hello there! Well, don't just stand there like some stuffed dummy.'

Without getting up, she held out her hand. I bent over to kiss it, but Lëlya grabbed me around the neck, pulled me towards her, and kissed me on the lips.

'At long last,' she said. 'You and I must have been born under a lucky star.'

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Under a Lucky Star

The field hospital was not supposed to leave until evening. I was afraid of losing touch with my unit and told Lëlya that I had to go that very minute.

'Stay,' she said. 'Just for an hour. That won't make any difference. Wait, I'll be right back.'

She left the hut. Zosya asked: 'Who is that, sir? Your fiancée?'

'Yes,' I replied. What else could I have told her? Simple people want simple answers.

'Be quiet, Zosya!' snapped Vasil, shocked by her question. 'How dare you speak to an officer like that. May the Lord protect you!'

About ten minutes later an orderly came in and said the head doctor wanted to see me. The doctor greeted me angrily. 'Just what are you wangling here, young man?' he asked, his eyes flashing behind his thick glasses.

'Wangling? What do you mean?'

'I'm sorry but I can't think of a better word. What I mean is you're a civilian! Your unit belongs to the Union of Cities. That's a civilian organisation. I trust you know that while at the front you are under the command of the military authorities?'

'So it seems,' I said.

'No, not "it seems" – it in fact *is*!' shouted the doctor, turning red in the face and coughing. 'And so I expect you to act accordingly, or I shall have you arrested. "It seems . . . it seems",' he went on, all puffed up, imitating me.

'Yes, sir. But I still don't understand,' I said.

'You soon will. I am ordering you to remain here with the hospital until further notice. The proper written orders will be prepared. They will be handed to you in due course. For you to present to your CO. Who is your CO?'

'Commissioner Gronsky.'

'Gronsky . . . Gavronsky . . . Pishiperdonsky!' the doctor mimicked.

I said nothing.

'Oh, you, offended are you now?' The doctor shook his head reproachfully. 'Stay here with us a few days. After that incident with the mother I would be happy to have you to stay on permanently. Don't be embarrassed. I am well informed about everything. I was young once myself. I've suffered too. And I hate old people who've forgotten what it was like to be young. For some reason, we don't give love its due.'

The doctor let out a loud sigh. This conversation had made my head spin. I suspected Lëlya was somehow involved.

'There aren't many men in our unit,' I said. 'I can't just desert them, as you can understand.'

'Yes,' he sighed again. '"Desert"! A rather big word you've chosen, but I understand. It's a tough situation. You're going to Baranovichi, and so are we. We'll leave in two hours and not wait until night. We put the last of the wounded on the hospital train yesterday, so no one's left. You'll travel with us as far as Baranovichi, all right? We'll take the mother with us too and keep an eye on her.'

I agreed. The doctor patted me on the shoulder. 'Allow me to give you some advice as an old man. Cherish love as something precious. Treat love badly just once and the next one will be flawed. Yes, sir, it'll be flawed, defective. Well, off with you now. I'm glad to have met you.'

I walked out of the hut and saw Lëlya. She was sitting nearby on a bench under what looked like a slanting wooden mushroom. Mushrooms like this had been built in camps for sentries. I went over to her. Lëlya bent down and covered her face with her hands. 'No, no, no!' she said in a hurry, shaking her head, her hands still covering her eyes. 'What a spectacular fool I am! I hate myself ! Go away, please.'

'I'm staying,' I said. 'I'm going with you to Baranovichi.'

Lëlya dropped her hands and stood up. Her fingers had left marks on her cheeks. 'Come with me!' she said, taking me by the hand. We headed out onto the main road.

We walked to the first milestone and then turned around. The wind whipped the water in the puddles. Storm clouds were again blowing in from the west, piling up along the dim horizon.

We walked in silence, holding hands. Lëlya only said that after Odessa she had left immediately for

Moscow and managed to get transferred to a field hospital on the western front. She didn't explain why she had done this. But it was obvious, and neither she nor I cared to speak about it. We both knew that however wise or tender our words, they would sound wrong and that we still lacked the words capable of expressing the aching feeling of intimacy – a feeling between two people still almost strangers – that had sprung up in both of us now.

The hospital set out at two o'clock in the afternoon. The medical wagons moved along one after another. Vasil trailed after them on his cart. His shaggy dog, tied to the cart, did his best to keep up. I trotted alongside the field ambulance that was carrying Lëlya and an elderly nurse in gold glasses. Now and then I dropped back to see how Zosya was getting along in Vasil's cart. She always gave me a cheerful nod and said she was fine. But Vasil looked gloomy – no doubt he was thinking about what lay ahead: would they manage to catch up with the other refugees from their village or would they become lost and alone among strangers in Belorussia?

About twenty versts from Baranovichi, a few armed soldiers stood on the road. Alongside them was an officer on a mud-spattered horse. The officer raised his arm. Our convoy stopped. The officer rode up to the head doctor, saluted and began to report to him about something. The doctor, chewing on his moustache, gave him a sullen look. They were discussing something alarming. We felt it and became anxious. We soon learned that there were a good many sick refugees in a nearby village – it was visible from the road – and the officer, upon the order of the corps commander, was asking the doctor to send some of the medical staff to offer them first aid. The doctor agreed, and three wagons were sent to help.

'You're coming with us,' Lëlya said. 'It's your job to help refugees. We'll catch up with the convoy this evening in Baranovichi.'

'All right, let's go.'

We turned off onto a side road. The hospital convoy moved on. Vasil stood on the road for a long time watching us go. He seemed to be wondering whether or not to come with us. But finally, he shook the reins and shouted at his horses, and his cart set off down the road towards Baranovichi. A kilometre from the main road we spied in the bushes some soldiers armed with rifles and a machine-gun.

'Are the Germans really that close?' asked the nurse with the gold glasses. 'Please, go and ask them.'

I rode over to the soldiers.

'Ride on!' said a soldier in corporal stripes. He didn't even bother to look at me. 'You can pass. I'm disobeying orders by even talking to you, so keep moving. No one is allowed to stop here.'

We rode on. It started to rain. We could already see the beginnings of the village. From our vantage point the wretched place looked like an oozing pile of dung.

'It looks as though they're waiting for the Germans,' I said to Lëlya.

I looked to the west, the direction from which the Germans would probably come, and saw another outpost in a pasture that sloped down towards a gully. The soldiers were sitting and lying in a long chain, rather far from each other. Now it all made sense – it must be to stop the Germans.

'They're not here to stop the Germans,' said the orderly who was driving. 'This is something else. Look over there!' He pointed to the east. More soldiers. 'The whole village is surrounded!' said the driver. His voice was anxious. 'They're everywhere. I've got a feeling something's not right here.'

'What's wrong?'

'I don't know myself, but we shouldn't have come. We really shouldn't have.'

The driver proved to be right. We drove into the deserted village. At the gate stood an empty Red Cross wagon from some unidentified mobile unit. The wagon's driver shared with us the staggering news: we were trapped.

There was smallpox in the village. The army had encircled it, and thousands of refugees had stopped for the moment at nearby villages. Smallpox could easily spread to the army, and so orders had been given to send a mobile hospital unit to isolate the village and keep anyone from escaping. Anyone who tried to leave was to be shot.

The officer who had stopped us on the road had said nothing about smallpox. Our initial reaction was anger – not because we had been caught in a trap, but because we had been tricked into going to the village. Even had we known the truth, every last one of us would have volunteered to go in and help.

'The utter stupidity!' said Lëlya angrily. 'If they hadn't lied to us, we could have brought everything we needed to treat the sick. But now we don't have a thing, not even any vaccines!'

'It's not clear whether it was stupidity or something else,' the driver remarked.

'What are you talking about?' snapped the nurse with the gold glasses, Vera Sevastyanovna.

'Well, who knows?' he muttered. 'The bosses always have their own notions. They're cunning like that, more so than us.'

We couldn't set up in any of the huts; they were all full of sick villagers. There was one empty shed on

the common pasture. The crew from the mobile unit had already found it. We carried our medicine and other things inside. The mobile unit consisted of a doctor, a nurse and two orderlies. We found the nurse in the shed. She was sulky and had no eyebrows. We could hardly get a word out of her.

'This is one hell of a mobile unit!' our orderlies commented. 'More like a society of undertakers!'

We unpacked our medicines. The doctor from the mobile unit appeared. He was a flabby young man with puffy eyes and dark bristles on his cheeks.

'Well, well . . . greetings!' he said upon seeing us. It seemed our presence was an unpleasant surprise. 'Do you have any idea what you've let yourselves in for?'

'Smallpox,' I answered.

'Precisely! And do you know what smallpox is, young man? Have you seen it with your own eyes?'

'No, I haven't.'

'Well, then, let me be the first to congratulate you! Do you have any vaccines? No! Wonderful, just wonderful. So just what is it you're planning to do here then? Crank up the gramophone? Listen to a little Vyaltseva perhaps?'

We just stood there, saying nothing.

'As for me, I've had quite enough! I'm done with fooling around,' said the doctor.

'How dare you speak like that!' a furious Lëlya yelled at him.

'Mademoiselle!' The doctor's eyes blazed with fury. 'None of your little tantrums, please, even if they do suit you. Yes, you are indeed quite lovely when angry, but other than that your tantrums do nothing. I repeat, nothing! Just some empty pretty sounds. We're all in this trap. How did Pushkin put it: "Oh, you're trapped, little bird, stay, for there's no escape from my net"? Something like that, wasn't it?'

'Stop clowning around, doctor,' said Lëlya disapprovingly. 'It's disgusting.'

'*Ridi, Pagliaccio!*' the doctor sang with a laugh. 'What else can I do? Perhaps you can suggest a way out of this filthy mess?'

'He's drunk,' said Vera Sevastyanovna.

'Yes, indeed, if you wish, I'm drunk!' the doctor replied calmly, not insulted in the least. 'Got any morphine?'

'Very little. But we do have a lot of camphor.'

'If you had morphine, I'd put them all to sleep. That would do the trick!'

'That's enough of this foolish nonsense!' I said roughly. 'Give us everything you have. We'll do the work ourselves.'

'Delighted! You are doing me a favour! Please, do help yourselves!' He bowed theatrically. 'I'll give you all our vaccines. Go ahead and inoculate all those sick people. For everyone here is already sick. This is certain to be a remarkable medical experiment.'

I went straight up to him. 'You know what, you had better hold your tongue or I'll throw you out, captain or no captain. Military regulations don't mean a thing here.'

'Absolutely right,' he agreed. 'No rules or regulations. Just like in a plague-stricken city. Take the vaccines! Get to work! As for me, I want to sleep. I haven't slept for two days. That's something you young idealists ought to keep in mind as well.'

He walked over to a corner of the shed, collapsed onto the straw and fell asleep as he was pulling his greatcoat over himself.

'Let him sleep, he needs it,' said Vera Sevastyanovna. 'Nurse, give us your vaccines.'

'You need to sign for them,' she replied. It appeared she had not been paying any attention to our conversation with the doctor.

I signed and the nurse gave us the medicine.

'Well, now what?' Lëlya whispered to me.

'Good question.' I answered. 'Whatever we do, it's probably useless. You stay here, and I'll start by making the rounds of the huts with one of the orderlies. Let's see what I find.'

'No! I'm not letting you go by yourself. And it's not because I can't do without you.' She blushed ever so slightly. 'No! It's just that it won't be so terrible if we all stick together.'

The four of us – Vera Sevastyanovna, Lëlya, the orderly and I – left together.

A dreary rain blanketed the fields. Potato stalks littered the vegetable plots like piles of broken, black bones. It was already autumn. Our legs slithered through the wet clay mixed with manure and rotting straw. Not a wisp of smoke rose from the hovels, but for some reason the air smelled of scorched feathers. The stench was coming from a pile of old rags still smouldering near a fence on the far side of the village.

'They're burning all the sick villagers' old rags and things,' said the orderly and then added with a laugh, 'They call it disinfecting!'

There were no dogs or chickens left in the village, just one undernourished cow mooing in a shed. It made a plaintive sound as it choked on its thick saliva.

'Yes,' said Vera Sevastyanovna all of a sudden, 'it's just like Dante's *Inferno*.'

We went into the first hut we saw. On the front step, Lëlya tied gauze bandages over our mouths. I opened the door. A warm stench hit us in the face. The hut's windows had been covered. At first, we couldn't make anything out. There was just a child's monotone voice that kept repeating over and over the same words: 'Oy, Grandpa, untie my hands . . . oy, Grandpa, untie my hands.'

'Don't touch a thing!' Vera Sevastyanovna ordered. 'Let's have some light.'

I switched on my electric torch. Other than a broken wooden bed covered in a pile of tattered clothes we couldn't see a thing. A pair of legs that ended in some old leather shoes hung down from the stove, but the actual person to whom they belonged wasn't visible.

'Anyone still alive up?' asked the orderly.

'Don't even know myself if I'm alive or dead,' came a weak voice from above.

I shone the light. An old man in a brown tunic sat on top of the stove. He had a patchy beard, as if clumps of it had been torn out.

'Thank goodness somebody's finally come,' he said. 'Hey, soldiers, give me a hand, I, um, I can't pull him down by myself.'

'Who?'

'He's lying right here next to me, my daughter's husband. He's been here since last night. Hot as an oven he was, but I just touched him now and he's as cold as a stone. I don't like it.'

'Oh my God,' Lëlya whispered. 'What's that?'

The pile of rags on the bed began to move, and the child's voice began again: 'Oy, Grandpa, I can't stand it anymore. Untie my hands.'

'Those two up there are beyond help,' said Vera Sevastyanovna. 'Shine the light over here.'

I lit up the bed with my torch, and we saw a pair of eyes – huge, black eyes, bright with fever – and crimson cheeks. A girl about the age of ten lay under the rags. I carefully pulled the rags off her. She trembled and squirmed and then held out her hands that had been tied together with a strip of old towel. Her shirt had fallen open at her chest, and for the first time I saw smallpox – flaming purplish spots dotted with black centres that looked like dried tar. The spots appeared as if they had been glued onto the girl's greenish skin. The girl shook her head from side to side. Her dark hair fell loose, exposing a crumpled red ribbon.

The orderly brought in some cold water from the porch. He was upset to see how her hands had been tied to keep her from scratching her sores. 'Oh, why this cruelty?' he muttered. 'Why torture the poor souls?'

Lëlya gave the girl something to drink. I held her head. Even with my leather gloves on I could feel the dry fever coming off the nape of her thin neck.

'Give me the camphor!' said Vera Sevastyanovna.

The smell of ether filled the room. After the camphor, we injected the girl with morphine. Lëlya wiped her face with sweet-smelling vinegar.

'Well,' the orderly said to me, 'let's carry out the dead man.'

Lëlya took me by the hand, but then quickly let go. Her eyes begged me not to touch the dead man's body, but she said: 'Just remember . . . All right, never mind!'

The corpse lay on a heavy linen sheet. We grabbed the corners of the sheet and carried the body out, trying not to touch it. The body fell onto the floor just as we got to the door.

'Dump him in the shed,' the old man said. 'There are two of them in there already.'

The shed door was propped open with some pitchforks. Inside lying face down on the dirt floor was an old woman and next to her a little girl of about five.

'Oh, this war, this war!' said the orderly. 'I'd like to take all the generals and politicians and rub their faces in this stinkin' mess. The damned butchers!'

We went back to the hut. It had to be aired out, but it was already cold outside, as it is before the first snow of the season.

'We should light the stove,' the orderly said, 'but they've burned up every last bit of wood. There isn't a log left.'

He went out, and we could hear him swearing as he ripped up boards from the porch steps. We opened the doors and lit the stove.

'Come on down, Grandpa,' said Vera Sevastyanovna. 'We're going to inoculate you.'

'What for?' he answered indifferently. 'I'm not going to live. Either way I'll starve to death. No need to waste your medicines on me.'

But we inoculated him just the same, aired out the hut and left after promising the old man to send him some bread. It got worse and worse after that. We gritted our teeth and kept on working, avoiding each other's eyes. The orderly cursed under his breath the whole time, but we paid him no attention. It seemed that everywhere we looked we saw smallpox, in all its varied manifestations.

'This is pointless,' Vera Sevastyanovna finally said. 'We can't save anyone. None of them were ever vaccinated. That fool of a doctor was right, of course.'

'Really?' asked Lëlya. 'Then what are we to do?'

'Make sure we don't catch it ourselves. That's all.'

'And the sick?'

'Morphine,' Vera Sevastyanovna said curtly. 'To ease their suffering.'

The orderly spat and cursed. And cursed again a few more times. We returned to our shed, and Vera Sevastyanovna inoculated the entire staff. This was the beginning of a dark and agonising time for us.

We went from hut to hut, injecting the dying with morphine and giving them water to drink and watching in silent despair as the last few who had escaped the disease eventually fell ill themselves. We dragged the dead into the sheds. The doctor from the mobile unit ordered the sheds to be burned. He gave the order himself each time; it seemed to cheer him up. The orderlies laid straw around the outside of the sheds and set fire to it. The sheds resisted the flames at first, but then burned wildly, giving off heavy smoke.

Our shed reeked of carbolic acid. The acid had blistered our hands so badly that we couldn't wash them. The pain from the water was unbearable. The nights were easier. We lay side by side on the straw, covered by our coats and felt rugs. It wasn't until sometime in the middle of the night that we finally warmed up, and we never did sleep well.

The doctor had settled down by now and liked to ramble on in a low voice about his family back in Berdyansk – his wife, a thrifty homemaker, and his son, the cleverest little boy in the world. But no one listened to him. Everyone was busy with their own thoughts.

I lay between Lëlya and a quiet, freckled orderly – a Pole by the name of Syrokomla. He often cried at night. We knew that at the front people cried only about the death of loved ones. But none of us said a word, and no one ever tried to comfort him. Those were wasted tears. They did not lessen his grief; just the opposite – they only added to it. Sometimes during the night Lëlya also wept, silently, holding my hand tightly. Only the slight trembling of her body told me she was crying. I would gently stroke her hair and wipe away the tears on her cheeks. She would press her hot face to my hand and begin to cry even harder. Vera Sevastyanovna said again and again: 'Lëlya, don't. Try to stay strong.'

Her words helped. Lëlya calmed down.

When my coat slipped off during the night, Lëlya always pulled it up over me again. We never spoke to each other at night. We just lay there in silence and listened to the rustling of the straw under the eaves. Once in a while we heard a distant gunshot. Then, we would raise our heads from the straw and listen. We all wanted the front to reach us as soon as possible.

One night, I don't remember when, Lëlya whispered to me: 'If I die, don't burn me in a shed.' Her whole body was trembling.

'Don't talk nonsense!' I told her. I took her hand in mine and felt my heart skip a beat. Lëlya's hand was as cold as ice.

I touched her forehead – it was burning.

'Yes,' she said sadly. 'Yes . . . I felt it coming on yesterday. Just don't leave me alone, stay with me, my sweet darling.'

I woke Vera Sevastyanovna and the doctor. The orderlies woke up too. We lit the lanterns. Lëlya turned away from the light. For a long time no one spoke. Finally, Vera Sevastyanovna said: 'The hut next door is empty. We need to scrub and disinfect it and then heat it up.'

The orderlies discussed it among themselves and then, after some sighs, went out. The doctor took me aside and said in a low voice: 'I will do everything I can. Understand? Everything!'

I said nothing and just shook his hand. Lëlya called me.

'Goodbye,' she said, looking at me with an odd, peaceful smile. 'Although it was short, still I was happy . . . Very. It's just that I couldn't say it . . .'

'I'll stay with you,' I replied. 'I'm not leaving you, Lëlya.'

She shut her eyes and shook her head, just as she had before on that bench under the wooden mushroom.

As hard as I try, I can no longer quite remember what happened next. I only recall bits and pieces. I recall the cold hut. Lëlya sitting on the bed, Vera Sevastyanovna undressing her. I was helping. Lëlya sat with her eyes closed. She was having trouble breathing. I saw her young, bare body for the first time and

it struck me as precious and tender. It was horrifying to consider that her long, slender legs, her graceful arms and her delicate breasts had already been touched by death. Everything about her feverish, helpless body was dear – from the fine hairs on the nape of her neck to the mole on the dark skin of her hip.

We laid her down in bed. She opened her eyes and said in a clear voice: 'Leave my clothes here. Don't take them away!'

Vera Sevastyanovna and I never left her side. Late in the evening Lëlya seemed to lose consciousness. She had stopped tossing about and lay so quietly that at times I became frightened and leaned over her to make sure she was still breathing. Night dragged on slowly. There were no signs to tell us how much longer until morning – no cocks crowing, no footsteps of passers-by, no stars in the heavy sky. Towards dawn Vera Sevastyanovna left for the shed to go and lie down for an hour.

When the morning light began to filter in through the windows, Lëlya opened her eyes and called to me. I bent down over her. She pushed me back with a feeble hand and for a long time stared into my face with such tenderness, grief and worry that I couldn't bear it. My throat seized up, and I started to cry for the first time in the many years since my half-forgotten childhood.

'Don't, my dear friend,' said Lëlya. Tears filled her eyes. 'Put the jug of water here next to me on the stool . . . Over in the shed . . . there's some cranberry juice. Go and get it . . . I'm thirsty . . . I want something sour.'

I got up.

'And . . .' Lëlya said, 'I want to tell you . . . my darling, my one joy . . . don't cry. I've forgotten everyone . . . even Mother . . . Only you.'

I rushed out to the porch, brought Lëlya the water, and then hurried off to the shed. When I returned with the cranberry juice Lëlya was sleeping quietly, and her face, with its half-opened mouth, amazed me by its unnatural pale beauty. I had arrived too late with the juice. Not waiting for me, Lëlya had drunk some water. She had spilled a little of it on the floor around her bed.

I don't remember how long I remained by Lëlya's side, standing guard over her sleep. A faint light was already filtering through the window when I realised Lëlya wasn't breathing. I grabbed her hand. It was cold. No matter how I tried, I couldn't find a pulse. I raced over to the shed to wake Vera Sevastyanovna. Together with the doctor, the three of us ran back to the hut where Lëlya lay.

Lëlya was dead. Vera Sevastyanovna found a box of morphine on the stool under her clothes. The box was empty. Lëlya had sent me to fetch the cranberry juice so she could take a fatal dose of morphine.

'Well,' said the doctor, 'she had earned an easy death.'

Vera Sevastyanovna was silent.

I sat down on the floor next to the bed and hid my face in the upturned collar of my coat. I sat there for I don't know how long. Then I got up, went over to Lëlya, lifted her head and kissed her eyes, her hair and her cold lips. Vera Sevastyanovna pulled me away and ordered me to immediately rinse out my mouth with some caustic liquid and scrub my hands.

We dug a deep grave on a small hill outside the village near an old willow tree. The tree was visible from far away. The orderlies made a coffin out of some old, blackened boards. I took the plain silver ring off Lëlya's finger and hid it in my rucksack. Lëlya was even more beautiful in the coffin than she had been just before her death. Filling in the grave, we heard gunshots. There were only a few of them, at regular intervals.

That same day we learned that the village was no longer surrounded. The soldiers had left without bothering to inform us. Perhaps the gunfire had been intended as a signal, but we didn't understand.

We left the village at once. The countryside all around was deserted. After we had gone about half a verst, I stopped and turned my horse round. Far off through the light fog of a gloomy autumn day, I could see under the leafless willow tree the small cross over Lëlya's grave. It was all that remained of her once vibrant young soul, of her voice, her laugh, her love and her tears. Vera Sevastyanovna called to me.

'Go on ahead,' I said. 'I'll catch up with you.'

'Promise?'

'Go on!'

The convoy started. I sat there motionless on my horse, looking back at the village. I felt that the slightest movement would break that final thin thread connecting me to life, I would fall from my horse, and all would be over. The convoy stopped a few times to wait for me and then disappeared from sight behind a stand of trees.

I rode back to the grave. I dismounted and didn't bother to tether my horse. It whinnied softly, its nostrils flaring nervously. I knelt down by the grave and pressed my head into the cold earth. Beneath this thick, wet soil lay a young woman born under a lucky star.

What was I to do? Stroke this clay that touched her face? Dig up the grave to see that face and kiss those eyes one last time? What was I to do?

Someone grabbed me by the shoulders from behind. I turned around. It was the orderly Syrokomla. He held a grey horse by the reins. This was the doctor's horse.

'Let's go!' said Syrokomla, looking at me uncomfortably with his light eyes. 'Stop this!'

I couldn't get my foot into the stirrup for a long time. Finally, Syrokomla held it for me. I mounted and rode off slowly through the cold, leaden puddles.

61

The Bulldog

My unit was not in Baranovichi. It had already moved on towards Nesvizh, the commandant told me. I didn't want to go back to the hospital even for a little while. It was too hard to be around people. I spent the night in a signalman's hut outside town on the line to Minsk, and then left in the morning for Nesvizh. I let my horse go at his own pace. He walked along slowly, even stopping at times to think about something. Or perhaps to rest. After a bit he would move on again, shaking his head as he went.

It was a fresh autumn day, free of rain but with dreary clouds hanging low over the fields. I reached a small village by midday. I don't recall its name. I decided to stay the night there. The retreat had slowed down, and our unit could not go any farther than Nesvizh. I was certain I'd catch up with it tomorrow.

The village hugged the shores of a small lake at the bottom of a hollow. At the far end of the lake water rushed over the dam by an old mill. Dark willows stretched out so far over the lake that it appeared they might lose their balance at any moment and fall into the deep water. I asked some old Jewish women where I could stay for the night. They pointed me towards a simple inn, a broken-down wooden building that reeked of paraffin and herring. The inn-keeper, a tiny Jew with a shock of red hair on his head, said yes, of course, he had a place where I could sleep for the night, but it was a small room and I would have to share it with an artillery officer and so it would be tight. He led me to the room. It was as narrow as a coffin. The officer wasn't there, but his camp bed had already been set up. There was just enough room for my bed, but not enough for either of us to sit down on them.

'Your home for the night!' said the innkeeper. 'It's nice and quiet here, and we don't have any bedbugs, as God is my witness! You can have an omelette for supper or I can boil you some milk.'

'But what about the officer?' I asked. 'Will he agree to this?'

'Oh, good God!' he cried. 'That's funny! Dvoira, did you hear what he asked? This here is no officer. This is an angel from heaven.'

I took my horse to the barn, fed him and then headed off for the village. I didn't want to talk to anyone, or even hear the talk of others. Every word I spoke and every word I heard increased the distance between Lëlya and me. My pain was all I had left of her, and I feared its being blunted or softened. I had to guard it as the last thing that remained of our love. Poetry was the only language that didn't upset me and from which I didn't feel the need to hide. Verses kept coming to me for mysterious reasons from the hidden depths of my memory, and the comfort they offered was neither obtrusive or painful.

I walked over to the lake, sat down on the shore under a willow, and listened to the sound of the water flowing through the rotten mill-race. Towards evening a soft yellowish glow tinged the clouds. Somewhere beyond the rim of the earth the sun was shining its meagre light. The water mirrored the yellow sky. Under the willows it was already cold and damp. I recalled a few lines I had read long ago whose author I had forgotten: 'An old miller opened to me his home by the black willows, on my nighttime journey . . .'

There was nothing special about the lines. But somehow, for me, they held a magical healing power. The loneliness of my nighttime journey soothed me for some strange reason. But almost at once I buried my face in my hands – familiar words came to me in an echo of that sweet voice across a vast, cold, windswept distance. There the heavy dusk was gathering over an abandoned grave. There lay the girl from whom I never should have been parted, not even for a single hour. I distinctly heard her words: 'Springtime, you have no name. For you, my distant one, there is no name.'[1] These had been her favourite lines. I repeated them now, but my ears heard the distant voice of Lëlya, not my own. It was a voice neither I nor anyone else would ever hear again.

I got up and walked towards the field beyond the village. Dusk now filled all the air between the sky and the rust-brown fields. It was already difficult to see the road, yet still on and on I walked. A dull glow rose over the village of Luninets. To the north, a lone white star shone above a hut that sat dark and lonely amid the fields. 'Her lucky star!' the thought struck me. 'The one she had believed in a few days before her death.' No, I told myself, it is simply impossible to accept the permanent disappearance of a fellow human being.

It was dark when I returned to the inn. My camp bed had been set up in the little room. The artillery officer, his face brown from the sun and his eyebrows singed by fire, lay in bed reading a book by candlelight. As I entered, I heard a ragged growl coming from under his bed.

'Mars, quiet!' said the officer. He sat up and extended a hand. 'Lieutenant Vishnyakov. Glad to have a roommate. Think we can get any sleep in here tonight?' he asked, a note of doubt in his voice.

'Dvoira!' shouted the innkeeper from behind the wall. 'Why don't you go and see if the gentlemen officers want something to eat?'

I wasn't hungry but had a cup of tea and then lay down. The artillery officer was a quiet fellow, which came as a relief. A large yellow bulldog crawled out from under his bed, came over and stared at me in the face for a long time.

'He's begging for sugar,' said the officer. 'Don't give him any. He's picked up a bad habit of begging. It's torture having a dog with you at the front, but I'd hate to get rid of him. He does make an excellent watchman.'

I patted the dog. He grabbed my hand with his teeth and held it there for a minute to frighten me and then let go. It seemed he was a friendly sort. I lay there with my eyes closed for a long time. Ever since childhood I had loved to lie like this, pretending to be asleep, and dreaming up all sorts of adventures or travelling with closed eyes around the world.

But now I didn't want to make up adventures or travel. I only wanted to remember. I recalled my time with Lëlya and bemoaned the fact that even though we had lived side by side for a long time, still we had been so distant from one another. It was not until Odessa that everything had become clear to us. Or perhaps it had happened earlier, the day we had sat in the poor Polish hut on the river Vepsh and listened to the fairytale about the lark with the golden beak. Or even earlier, in Khentsiny, when Lëlya sat at my beside all night long as the rain poured down.

Then I recalled Romanin. What had happened to him? Why had he become so rude to me? It must have been my fault. I understood that my habit of giving in to people – what he called my unsteadiness – irritated him, as did my tendency to see the good in everything, even in things that were in clear opposition to each other, which he called spinelessness. To him I was a 'wobbly *intelligènt*', and what made it all the harder to bear was that I was the only one he treated so unfairly. 'I'm not like that at all, and that's the truth,' I told myself, but how was I to prove that to him?

The clatter of metal wheels woke me in the middle of the night. The artillery was passing through the village. I drifted off after that and fell back asleep. I sat up in terror at the sound of a strange wailing in the room. At first I thought it was the dog, but then I heard the officer's bed creak and shake. I lit a candle. He was groaning and writhing in convulsions. Yellow foam oozed from his mouth. It was 'falling sickness', an epileptic fit. I had seen a great many of them on the hospital train and knew just what to do. I had to put a spoon in the officer's mouth and hold it there so he didn't bite or swallow his tongue. There was a spoon in my cup of cold tea on the windowsill. I grabbed it and tried to stick it in his mouth, but there was so little room to move and he shook and thrashed so violently I couldn't. I got on top of him and pinned him down to the bed when all of a sudden, I felt a stabbing pain in my neck and a heavy weight on my back. Not understanding what had just happened, I tried to shake it off until I felt the sharp fangs digging deep into my neck. In defence of his master, the dog had leapt on me from behind without making a sound. He thought I was strangling him.

His jaws tightly clenched, the dog tried to swallow. I could feel the skin tighten around my neck and knew that in seconds I would pass out. With my last bit of remaining strength, I forced myself to pull my Browning from under the pillow, point it behind me next to my ear, and fire.

I never heard the shot go off. All I heard was the heavy thud of a falling body. I turned around. The dog lay on the floor. His teeth were bared and blood trickled from his mouth. His body shook, and then he lay still.

'They're fighting!' cried the innkeeper from the other room. 'Fighting, oh, dear God!'

'Shut up!' I yelled. 'Get in here! I need help.'

He appeared in nothing but his white nightshirt, carrying a thick candle in a silver candlestick. His eyes were filled with terror.

'Hold him,' I said to the innkeeper. 'I'm going to try to put this spoon in his mouth or he might bite off his tongue. It's the falling sickness.'

The innkeeper grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed him down. I thrust the spoon into the officer's mouth and turned it sideways. He bit down so hard on it I thought his jaw had snapped.

'Sir, you have blood on your back,' the innkeeper said in a gentle voice.

'It was the dog. It jumped up and bit me. I shot it.'

'Oh, what a world!' the innkeeper cried. 'Just look what we've done to each other!'

All of a sudden, the officer went limp and quiet. The attack had passed.

'He'll sleep for a few hours now,' I said. 'We've got to get the dog out of here.'

The innkeeper picked up the bulldog and buried it in the garden. Dvoira, a thin woman with a kind, meek face, came in. I unpacked my first aid kit and she cleaned and then bandaged the wounds on my neck. I told the innkeeper I didn't want to see the officer when he woke up so I would be leaving as soon as it was light.

'Right you are!' he said. 'He'll be sad, and you'll feel bad, even though it's nobody's fault. Come and sit with us. Dvoira, light the samovar. Have a cup of tea for the road.'

After I had drunk about half a cup of their thick tea, Dvoira said: 'Just imagine! Another minute and he'd have strangled you. I'm shaking just thinking about it.'

My neck hurt. I could hardly turn my head.

'Life isn't what it once was,' said the innkeeper with a sigh. 'And a kopeck isn't either. Now it's worthless. If only you could have visited before the war. Every day had a sense of order to it, every day brought with it its own pleasures. I would open up the inn early in the morning, and wagons would roll in with kind people – some on their way to the market, others to the mill. I knew them all for fifty versts around. They came to the inn to eat and drink – some tea, others *horilka*. And it made us happy to watch folks enjoy our plain, wholesome food – bread and onions, or sausage and tomatoes. They chatted happily, about prices, about the harvest, about the quality of the flour, about potatoes and hay, and I don't know what else – everything under the sun! It was a quiet, peaceful time that made your soul feel good. I never had to chase after every last kopeck, as long as I had enough to live on and a bit left over to pay off the local police inspector. I had one wish – an education for my children. Well, you could say they're getting one now, as soldiers in the army. It's all gone to ruin. Everything's ruined, our entire lives.'

It began to get light. Thick mist covered the ground. It made the trees look taller than they were. The mist foretold a fine, clear day. I said goodbye to them. The innkeeper asked me to leave a note for the officer. I wrote: 'I'm sorry, but I had to shoot your dog.'

The sun came up when I was a couple of versts past the village. Everything shone with dew. In the distance, the rust-brown woods, lit by the early light, seemed to be smouldering darkly. The air on the land was unusually sharp and clear, as though it had been locked up for a long time and only now given its freedom.

I pulled up my horse, took Lëlya's ring out of my knapsack and put it on my little finger. It felt warm on my hand. I caught up with my unit in the village of Zamirie, near Nesvizh.

[1] Final lines of Blok's 'For you, there is no name, my distant one' (1906).

62

A Dank Winter

In October there was a lull in the fighting. Our unit found itself in Zamirie, not far from the Baranovichi–Minsk railway line. I had never seen a more dismal village in my life. Low, tumble-down huts, flat, naked fields, and not a tree in sight.

Adding to this depressing picture was our transport corps – muddy carts, mangy horses and soldiers who by now had lost all spit and polish. Their shabby, fake sheepskin hats were in tatters, the earflaps sticking out like the wings of a shot bird, their quilted jackets were shiny with grease, their greatcoats held together with string, and a ragged, wet cigarette butt stuck to the lips of every other man.

Autumn arrived late, black and devoid of light. Thick condensation clung to the windows of our hut. It would build up and then pour down in streams so that we couldn't see a thing outside. The wind howled at our door. The carts sank into the oozing mud, and we brought it inside with us on our boots. The conditions were miserable. Romanin and I had soon had enough. We scrubbed the floors and cleaned up the hut as best we could and didn't allow anyone in except on business.

When I returned to the unit Romanin gave me a big hug as if there had never been anything wrong between us. Evidently, he had just been overtired. Turning away to hide his tears, he called me a swine and said I had caused him to go grey. With that he pointed to a grey streak of hair as proof. He had always had it, but, in all fairness, it was whiter and larger than before. I told him that Lëlya had died. He sat listening at the table and blew his nose a few times, and his eyes reddened. I tried not to look at him. He got up and went out. When he returned he was quiet, and drunk. He had never done such a thing before.

Gronsky was gone by the time I arrived. He had had a nervous breakdown and had to be taken to Minsk. He had been replaced by Kedrin, a lawyer and prominent member of the Kadet Party.[1] Kedrin was a little old man with a silver imperial and imposing spectacles. In his grey fur jacket, he reminded one of a large, well-educated rat, and so he became known as 'the Honourable Mr Rat'. Polite, boring, unbelievably naïve in military matters, ignorant of village life, and of life in general, he busied himself with writing political commentaries and 'analyses of the developing situation' and basically stuck out amid the rapidly disintegrating army like a sore thumb.

There were few refugees anymore, most of them having settled in the surrounding villages. Since we had nothing to do, Romanin decided to build a public *banya* there in Zamirie. Slowly more and more people, all of them out of work, were drawn into the project. It became a major undertaking. Officials, technicians, army engineers and experts on *banya* construction and heating systems from Minsk and even Moscow started to arrive. Romanin quarrelled with all of them. There were angry rows, and he even sent a few of them packing.

Crawling with lice, the troops waited for the opening of the *banya* as for a miracle. To them Romanin was a saintly father figure. Even the transport soldiers saluted him and acknowledged his authority. Kedrin gave a number of speeches, always eloquent and at times even lofty, devoted to the construction of the *banya* over our evening tea. He not only addressed the deeper philosophical justifications for the *banya* but explained how steam baths formed one of the basic principles of the Kadet Party's progressive politics that would in the end bring happiness to our long-suffering 'Mother Russia'. Kedrin sprinkled his speeches with famous quotations and names, including Tuhan-Baranovskyi, Struve and even Lassalle.[2] Romanin liked to joke how Kedrin's speeches were worthy of being delivered in front of the Imperial State Duma. Indeed, old Kadet Kedrin provided us with plenty of material for jokes. He didn't take our teasing well and became terribly upset over every little jest.

One day a red-bearded man appeared in our hut. He had his greatcoat slung over his shoulders and a sheepskin hat that clung, as if by a miracle, to the back of his head. He had a loud but pleasant voice and eyes full of laughter. He presented himself as a specialist in *banyas* and delousing. No one knew his surname, so everyone just called him 'Redbeard'.

He had burst into our hut and made himself at home, and from that moment the business of the *banya* took an unexpected turn. Conversations began about all manner of subjects, ranging from the possibility of constructing Roman baths to recollections of Moscow's Sandunovskie *banyas*, the hot springs of Tiflis,

the superlative description of them by Pushkin, Pushkin's prose, prose in general – what Redbeard called the 'God of the Arts' – the question of whether Pushkin or Lermontov was the better prose writer, the plan for *War and Peace* (supposedly Tolstoy had been handed Lermontov's own early rough drafts of the novel), Tolstoy's funeral at Yasnaya Polyana, *Anna Karenina*, Levin shooting snipe, shooting in general, and Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Eventually it emerged that Redbeard had visited Chekhov at Yalta and produced some of his plays at various provincial theatres, that he was fluent in French, and that he didn't know the first thing about constructing a *banya*.

We failed miserably in trying to discover his profession. Whenever we asked him, he would respond with some lines by the poet Maximilian Voloshin. According to Redbeard, these verses perfectly captured the essence of his life:

> Exiles, wanderers and poets,
> Hungry for life, yet failures at living.
> The beast has its dark lair, the bird its nest,
> Yet for us, just a staff, penury and no rest.

Within two days of his arrival, we could not understand how we had managed to survive in God-forsaken Zamirie without him.

Redbeard took Kedrin for an utter nobody. When Kedrin started on one of his numbing monologues, thus putting an end to our conversations, Redbeard would turn to him and say with a good-natured smile: 'Hold on there, old man! It's not your turn, but we'll let you know when it is.'

Sometimes, usually at night, our conversations turned to matters of burning importance. We talked of revolution. Romanin was drawn to the Socialist Revolutionaries – the SRs – Kedrin droned on and on about the Kadets in the manner of some tedious professor, and Redbeard responded by saying the workers' revolution was going to send both of them to hell. More and more often were heard the words 'International' and 'Lenin'.

When Redbeard spoke, everyone was quiet. It was as if you could hear the roar of the crowds, the roar of the revolution itself sweeping over Russia and wiping it clean. Not even Kedrin interrupted Redbeard. He just sat there polishing his spectacles with shaky hands, shrugging his shoulders and snorting violently. This was the most extreme form of protest he permitted himself, along with the frequent refrain of 'I beg your pardon!' He liked to say this in a haughty and defiant tone. But this was as far as Kedrin would usually go before he withdrew to bed, muttering something under his breath, carefully folding his Zemgor uniform and placing it neatly on a chair.[3]

One day, however, when a nurse known as the 'Black-Eyed Beauty' came to visit from a neighbouring medical unit, Kedrin revealed himself as an incorrigible Don Juan. He dug a bottle of Coty perfume from Paris out of his suitcase and presented it to her. The nurse made eyes at him and giggled with delight. He minced about her, rubbing his hands, until Redbeard raised his voice: 'Calm down, old man! We'll let you know when it's your turn.'

After the February Revolution Kedrin served for a time as a commissar in the Provisional Government on the western front. It's easy to imagine all the insipid and nauseating speeches he made in front of the soldiers. Kedrin was lucky they didn't kill him.

I visited a lot of small towns and villages that winter, either on horseback or by train. Romanin was always sending me off to gather building material for the *banya*, first to Nesvizh, then to Mir, Slutsk and Minsk. Belorussia at the time looked like an old landscape you might see hanging on the wall of a fly-blown buffet in some railway station near the front. Traces of the past were visible everywhere, but they were nothing more than a façade – the contents had disappeared.

I saw the great houses of the Polish aristocracy – Prince Radziwiłł's in Nesvizh was particularly sumptuous – the nobles' folwarks, the picturesque though cramped and rundown Jewish villages, the old synagogues and the Gothic churches which, amid the stunted woods and bogs, looked like foreign visitors. I saw the black and white striped verst markers still standing from the time of Nicholas I.

But the magnates and their glittering, reckless lives were no more, gone along with their obedient serfs, gone with the home-grown rabbi-philosophers and their terrifying warnings about the Day of Judgment that once reverberated in the synagogues, gone with the rotting banners of the 'First Rebellion' that had hung over the altars of the Catholic churches.[4] True, the older Jews of Nesvizh could still tell stories about the luxurious pleasures of the Radziwiłłs, about how their thousands of serfs used to stand at attention with torches along the road all the way to the Russian frontier when the prince rode out to meet his lover, the English adventurer Miss Kingston; about the roisterous hunts and feasts, about the swagger, arrogance and petty tyranny that counted in those days as the hallmark of Polish nobility. But their stories were now all second-hand.

The war was busy erasing what remained of that old way of life together with any dim memories of it. The war trampled on it, drove it into hiding, drowned it out with its rough cursing and the lazy grunt of its guns, which fired even in winter, as if just to clear their throats. But through all the confusion and turmoil of wartime, the features of a new, transitional era could already be seen, and people felt tense and anxious as at the slow approach of a thunderstorm. It was a dank winter. The snow fell and then melted. For weeks on end, dirty, mushy slush covered the ground. Damp, persistent winds blew from Poland, scratching at the wet straw covering the Belorussian huts.

I loved my travels because I liked being alone. I still couldn't move past the memories and feeling of alienation that had gripped me since the previous autumn. Daily life had begun to blur Lëlya's image. I was terrified to notice I was having trouble remembering the sound of her voice. During those journeys I subjected myself to all manner of hardships and privations with an obstinacy I still can't explain: I let myself be drenched by snow and sleet, I froze to the bone, I slept in barns or on the ground out in the open, I ate practically nothing and just smoked one damp, harsh cigarette after another. The slightest thing set my nerves on edge and filled me with feelings of grief and confusion.

This happened to me in Molodechno. I had spent the night in an empty, unheated third-class carriage in a station siding. I awoke at dawn. It was one of those cold, miserly dawns that come to drive away an equally miserly night. Winter belongs to the night; the days are but its poor relations who do their best to stay out of the way.

Lying under my greatcoat on a wooden bench, I managed to feel a bit of warmth. A bugle sounded somewhere down the tracks. There must have been a troop train at the station. The bugle made a plaintive, ringing sound. I shook inside, and suddenly, listening to the cry of the bugle, I realised the utter helplessness of my world, the utter pointlessness of my unsettled, miserable and lonely life. I thought of Mama, of my brothers off fighting on some neighbouring front, of Lëlya and of how the heart turns hard when deprived of care and human tenderness.

Why did I feel so lost and abandoned? I wanted to know. Evidently it was because we had been raised on books, on misty poetry and lofty ideas, and the *narod* – the Russian masses – had marched right past us, not only indifferent but completely unaware of our existence, the sons and supporters it had no need of.

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In early December while riding back to Zamirie on one of my trips, I lost my way and ended up on a road near the front line. It was a gloomy evening. The road was covered in ice. My horse picked his way, trying not to fall. Soon it grew so dark I couldn't even make out the bushes along the roadside.

I heard a distant rumbling up ahead. My horse hesitated and then began to prance. I listened and then recognised the familiar clatter of an artillery convoy on the move. Even though they were still far off, I carefully turned my horse to the side of the road: the recklessness of transport drivers was well known to everyone. Suddenly, there came a thin whine. Ahead on the road I saw the faint flash of an explosion. Then another, and another. The Germans were shelling the road. In between the explosions I could hear the convoy racing towards me at a gallop. The usual panic must have broken out. A shell burst next to me. I didn't even notice it, but something had happened to my left leg. It had turned to cotton wool.

I quickly reached down to my boot and my fingers came in contact with something sticky and warm. Raising my arm, I felt a shooting pain as though my leg was being split in two. I grabbed for the pommel of my saddle but couldn't hold on and dropped onto the road. I must have fallen on my wounded leg, for I lost consciousness for a moment.

When I came to, the furious thunder of the transport was upon me. I grabbed a stirrup and shouted at my horse, who, snorting and shivering, cautiously pulled me off the road and into the ditch. I lay there, clutching a stirrup, while right in front of my face the convoy roared past, the drivers yelling and whistling, the terrified horses snorting, the metal wheels crashing over the icy road. I felt as if it would never end.

And then everything was quiet. My horse sniffed me up and down and whinnied nervously. I took me a good five minutes to dig my electric torch out of my pocket and turn it on. I don't remember a thing after that. It seems I passed out again, and the torch lay there shining at my side.

Some soldiers from the signal corps riding by in a two-wheeled cart saw the light. They picked me up, bandaged me as best they could and took me to the field hospital in Nesvizh. I stayed in hospital for almost a month. It was a light wound, and the bone had not even been grazed. I was the only one in the ward; there were no other wounded. Romanin came to visit often. The *banya* was about to open, and he was beaming. Kedrin, the Honourable Mr Rat, visited me twice. His eyes twitching, his silver imperial shaking with fear and indignation, he told me all about Rasputin and the 'moral degradation of the

Imperial Court'. At the time Nicholas II was making an inspection tour of the western front. He came to Zamirie. The order went out to tidy up the village before his arrival. This consisted of bringing in from the closest forest a great many fir trees and propping them up as camouflage in front of the most dilapidated hovels.

I read a great deal while recovering. The Scandinavians – Ibsen, Strindberg, Hamsun, Bang – were all the rage then. I read Ibsen – that great manual labourer of the human soul. Then I came across Muratov's *Images of Italy*,[5] and I lost myself in the faintly bitter air of the country's museums and churches. I imagined I could see the high hills of Perugia, smudged by a light blue haze and softly radiant in the sun. I began reading Leonid Andreev's *Life of a Man* but put it aside for Chekhov's pure and direct *The Steppe*.

I was homesick for Russia. I kept thinking about the Bryansk forest, which I remembered as the happiest, most blessed place on earth. I could see its wooded ravines, its rivers and its patches of felled timber now home to young pine and birch, crimson willow-herb, and the white hats of the meadow rue. This was a golden land of peace and calm. I was desperate for such peace, and the realisation I might never know it again brought me close to tears.

Before long I was up and about on crutches and was even allowed to go into the village. I hobbled off to see a local watchmaker I knew. Surrounded by quietly ticking watches covering the four walls, a bunch of bright geraniums perched upon the windowsill, the watchmaker, his loupe screwed in place, filled me in on the local news.

I was given newspapers and magazines to read, most often *Little Fire*. I would look at the monotonous battle drawings by the artist Svarog[6] and the endless photographs of officers killed at the front. The newspapers were full of vague rumours and suggestions about Nicholas and Alix, Rasputin and Goremykin;[7] the black shadow of the raven's wing was falling over Russia. Romanin often sent me small parcels of food – cheese, sausage, sugar – wrapped in newspaper.

With nothing better to do one day, I picked up a paper, crumpled and covered in greasy cheese stains, and began to read. Looking through the list of casualties from the front I saw written: 'Killed on the Galician front, Lieutenant Boris Georgievich Paustovsky, Sappers' Battalion,' and a little farther down the page: 'Killed in action near Riga, Ensign Vadim Georgievich Paustovsky, Navaginsky Infantry Regiment.'

Both my brothers killed on the very same day. Even though I was still quite weak, the hospital's chief doctor released me. I was put in a cart and taken to Zamirie. That evening I left for Moscow to see Mama.

[1] The Constitutional Democratic Party (known as the Kadets) was a liberal political party composed chiefly of professionals and the educated elite. Yevgeny Kedrin (1851–1921), lawyer and political figure, later emigrated.

[2] Mykhailo Tuhan-Baranovskyi (1865–1919), Ukrainian economist, professor and political figure; Pëtr Struve (1870–1944), political economist and Marxist, later critic of the Soviet state; Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–64), German philosopher, socialist organiser and activist.

[3] Zemgor was an acronym for the United Committee for the Union of Zemstvos and Towns, created in 1915 to assist the government in the war effort.

[4] A reference to the Polish uprising against Russian rule in 1830–31.

[5] Pavel Muratov (1881–1950), art historian, critic, author of three-volume *Images of Italy*.

[6] Vasily Svarog (born Korochkin) (1883–1946), Russian-Soviet painter.

[7] Ivan Goremykin (1839–1917), prime minister of Russia 1914–16.

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A Grievous Commotion

Mama had completely shrivelled up and grown shorter. Her face still wore her old wounded expression of repressed grief which no one could understand. I arrived a month after the death of my brothers. Mama rarely cried. She never had been given to tears. Galya shook whenever she talked of our brothers, but only if Mama wasn't present. She held herself together when she was.

By then I had seen enough human grief to realise that people almost always look for ways to lighten it. This came most naturally to the old who believed in a reunion after death and a blessed hereafter for the souls of the departed. What else was there? Memories, friends, nature, knowledge of the fact that the deceased is remembered fondly, concern for those dear ones who are left behind.

Mama and Galya's grief was restrained, locked away. They had to go on living. Mama had to live for Galya, and Galya so that Mama could go on looking after her. I didn't know how to help. I, too, had been utterly crushed by the death of both my brothers at the same time. We had had little in common. We were all quite different, but this merely intensified the sorrow I felt for them, now no longer among the living.

Relief came quite by accident. I asked Galya what she and Mama knew about the circumstances of our brothers' deaths. It turned out that they knew nothing.

'We need to find out.'

'How?' asked Galya.

'Write to their regimental commanders. Find their army mates, those who were with them the day they died. Request their letters, diaries, any documents they might have left behind.'

I never could have imagined the effect my words would have. Life now had a purpose. There was a job to do.

Galya told this to Mama, and the very next day saw the start of a tenacious and feverish effort that refused to acknowledge any obstacles. The two of them wrote letters to the front. They relentlessly hunted down Dima's and Borya's comrades, even those who were in hospital or had been invalided out. They discovered the names of the soldiers under their command. They sent requests for information everywhere. At the same time, Mama began to seek my brothers' pensions. Replies began to arrive. Mama and Galya now began to spend most of their time discussing them, piecing the facts together surrounding my brothers' deaths, and writing responses for further, clarifying details. It turned out that Dima had kept a diary – just a few pages of scribbled notes. Mama and Galya spent whole days trying to decipher his handwriting.

Many people were drawn into their correspondence. Each one of them made casual references to the circumstances of their own lives, and so new acquaintances, blessed by the memory of my brothers, were made by post. Mama and Galya took a genuine interest in the lives of their new acquaintances. Mama, who had had a long habit of, as she liked to say, instructing others 'how to act honestly and correctly', wrote them long letters full of advice and suggestions, complete with examples from her own experience. For me it was both touching and sad to see this unhappy old woman, her own life in ruins, teaching others how they ought to live. Thus her sorrow gradually dissolved into the lives of others; it faded thanks to feverish activity and this grievous commotion. This made me happy even though I knew it could not go on like this forever. I worried what might follow.

My Aunt Vera Grigorievna, who lived in Kiev, had a small, wooded estate called Kopan on the river Pripyat. She had long been concerned by the fact that the estate was rarely used and no one was looking after it. More than once she had suggested to Mama that she should go and live at Kopan with Galya, but Mama had always declined since she had to stay in Moscow with Dima and Galya. Now, when Aunt Vera invited Mama once more, she readily accepted.

The decision had been made to leave in early spring. From that very minute Mama found some peace of mind and even cheered up. A bit of light had begun to shine. Mama had already started making plans to revive the estate and with only modest investments make it so prosperous that 'muddle-headed Aunt Vera would never dream it could have been possible'. Mama was not worried about me. I overheard her talking to Galya.

‘Why doesn’t Kostik worry as much as we do?’

‘He’s had a different life,’ said Mama. ‘He’s travelled a good deal, seen lots of things, and met all sorts of people. He has so many different interests. He’s a born vagabond! Like your father.’

There was, of course, a touch of disapproval in Mama’s comment. My father’s inability to stay in one place, in her opinion, had been the cause of our family’s impoverishment and ruin. Only one thing existed in this world for Mama – duty. Duty and nothing else. The fulfilment of self-imposed duties was the only happiness she had ever known. My father, on the other hand, had been ‘greedy for life’, as Mama used to say. To her, only selfish people were capable of such a thing. Such was Mama’s philosophy of life in her old age.

The Union of Cities had given me two months’ convalescent leave. I was to return to the unit in March. Meanwhile, the union offered me a job shipping medicines and food from Moscow to the front. This meant additional pay, and so I accepted. We needed to save some money for Mama’s trip to Kopan.

My work involved hiring draymen, collecting medicines and other supplies from a number of depots, and delivering them to the goods stations for shipment to the units of the Union of Cities. Every morning I went to Varvarskaya Square, where the draymen waited to be hired. Strict rules governed the process. No one was allowed to negotiate with any of the draymen individually. You could get beaten up for that. Huge, bearded peasants in heavy sheepskin coats over which they wore canvas aprons, the draymen stood waiting in a crowd on the square, joking and swearing like mad. They had to stand within sight of the foreman, who made sure no one tried to make a deal on the side and undercut the cooperative.

You had to walk through flocks of well-fed pigeons filling the square to reach the draymen. As soon as a customer appeared, the foreman whipped off his hat and passed it around so that each drayman could toss in his bronze number badge. Shaking the badges in his hat, the foreman then approached the customer, who pulled out as many badges as he needed carts. This lottery was preceded by furious bargaining, even though the rates for carrying and loading had been established by decades of tradition and were known to everyone.

After a month I knew nearly all the goods stations, depots and storehouses of Moscow. This was an enormous and little-known world with its own laws and customs. I got the impression that everyone stole – storehouse managers, watchmen, porters and especially the station clerks who weighed the goods. The draymen stole openly, and every time they were caught, they resorted to a well-tested response: they would start a fight amid a storm of overwhelming curses. Few people wanted to tangle with these raging giants, especially since they were duty bound to back each other up. Everything was stolen, from rusty old nails to bits of sacking.

This is what was happening down at the bottom. One could only guess what was happening up at the top. Everything dark, petty and grasping had been excited to the point of hysteria by the example of Rasputin. His name was on everyone’s lips. The horse thief of Tobolsk, the peasant with the lecherous eyes sat on the Russian throne and ruled over the country. ‘What’s Grishka Rasputin got that we haven’t?’ the draymen laughed, leering and whistling at the women passing by. ‘Grab while the going’s good, boys! It’ll soon be all gone! Grigory Yefimovich will back us up. We know how the old hypocrite does it, out stealing horses and the like.’

This band of thieves had only one holy and unbreakable rule: fair shares. Share the loot with each and every one who helped to steal it: give him his ‘lawful’ portion.

And the depots! I saw huge vaults stuffed with materiel for the army: hats that came apart in your hands, worthless greatcoats made of canvas, caps with broken peaks and badges that had already lost their shape, boots with rotten soles, undergarments made of calico that was so rough and full of sharp awns they would bloody men’s bodies. All this was sewn up in fresh-smelling new sacking and sent to the front. The sacking was, in fact, the only sound material in this pile of shoddy junk.

I couldn’t wait to get back to my unit. Distance had turned it into a comforting home. It seemed as though everything good and decent was there at the front, while here all was rotten.

Winter that year in Moscow, with its frequent thaws and dirty snow, its freezing drizzle, its black ice, reflected my feelings. The ice on the ponds in the Zoological Garden had melted. On one of them some sort of water bird let out a shrill cry: ‘What’s happened? Oh my God, what’s happened, what’s happened?’ We could hear it clearly from inside our flat.

I worked only half the day, came home early, had a meagre supper and retired to my cubbyhole of a room. Mama and Galya were busy sewing in preparation for the trip. The sewing machine chattered away until late into the night. The floor was littered with fabric scraps and bits of thread. I sat and wrote. About the war, about my generation. I was certain we would remake the world. We were a generation of restless dreamers and idealists. I naïvely believed that these qualities meant we would not allow ourselves to lead humdrum lives and die without having accomplished something, leaving nothing

behind, as Romanin liked to say, 'but our smell'.

Yet despite this certainty, I saw ever more clearly that alongside this generation of *intelligènty* and men and women who, imagining they belonged to no class, considered themselves to be the 'salt of the earth', there was the enormous mass of the *narod*, those millions of Russians who called themselves 'brother workers', who were living their own intense lives about which I knew almost nothing. These people possessed an undeniable life force, an intolerant, sober sense of right and wrong, born of the burdens carried on their backs. Their truth could not be charmed away by the melodic sounds of verse, no matter how beautiful, or obscured by the mists of Bergson's fashionable philosophy. I sensed the omnipresence of this truth, as though being watched by an insistent and intense pair of eyes. It became unmistakably clear to me that it was impossible to live and work honestly in Russia without first determining one's attitude to the working class, its struggle and its aspirations.

I began to write a story about a young man of my generation. I wrote it slowly over a long time. It followed me through the years of the revolution and civil war and began to ripen. I finally published it as *The Romantics*, but only much later in the 'thirties. I also wrote a few poems around this time and sent them to a famous poet. I had no hope he would respond, but he did. He sent me a postcard. In big, bold letters he wrote: 'You live like an actor delivering his lines from off stage.' That was all.

At the time I was leading a double life – one real, the other make-believe. This book is about the real one. My make-believe life existed independently and gave my real life all the things that it inevitably lacked – everything I held to be beautiful and alluring. My imaginary life was spent travelling the world, meeting fascinating people, taking part in important events. It was swathed in the mantle of love. And it was, in reality, one long, coherent dream.

Of course, now I can look back on my life at that age with a patronising smile. That's easy. All of us, wise from experience, feel we are entitled to such an attitude. Or at least that's how sober, mature people think who believe they alone are engaged in the serious business of life. But in the end they don't have a right to this smile. They don't have the right to laugh at the dreams of the young – dreams that sowed the first seeds of poetry in many a soul. These dreams possessed a purity and a nobility that have left their traces upon the whole of their lives. Everyone who enjoyed these gifts in their youth can agree with me in the knowledge that they once possessed inexhaustible treasures.

The world was ours. Neither time nor space had any limits. We could breathe the mushroom-scented air of the taiga one minute and that of the Parisian boulevards at dawn the next. We could talk to Hugo or Lermontov, Peter the Great or Garibaldi. We could declare our love to a seventeen-year-old girl in her brown school uniform as she nervously fidgeted with her pigtail or just as easily prostrate ourselves at the feet of Isolde. We could live with Miklukho-Maklai in the jungles of New Guinea, gallop with Pushkin to Erzurum, serve in the National Convention, cut the first paths through the wilds of Florida, languish in debtors' prison with Little Dorrit's father, or sail to England with the ashes of Byron. There were no borders in that world, and I have yet to meet the cynic who could honestly deny its value or its influence on our thoughts and actions.

This is what I wrote about. I wrote on a wide windowsill because I had no desk. I often stopped to look out of the window and gaze at the snow-covered lime trees in the Zoological Garden. I could hear the sad, unanswered cry of that bird on the lake: 'What's happened? Oh my God, what's happened?' As I was writing I received a letter from the Union of Cities. I had been summoned by its director, the prominent Kadet Shchepkin.[1] I went to see Shchepkin the next morning. The union's offices were in a large building next to the Moscow Arts Theatre. I was met by a small, elderly, amiable-looking man. He was wearing a displeased expression. 'Well, my dear young man,' he said, 'I'm afraid I have some most unpleasant news for you.'

His words were straight from Gogol's *Inspector General*, and it was evident that he was pleased with himself, for he cleared his throat, waved his pudgy hands in the air and repeated them: 'Most unpleasant news! During your time in Zamirie with one of our hospital trains the emperor paid a visit.'

'Yes,' I said, 'that is correct.'

'Yes,' Shchepkin replied, 'and something else is correct. Namely, that one of the members of the unit described the emperor's visit to Zamirie in a rather satirical fashion. He wrote this in a letter to a friend, having forgotten, no doubt due to his youth and inexperience, about the military censorship. Does this also sound correct?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'that is correct.' While I had been in hospital in Nesvizh I had heard a great deal about the emperor's visit and wrote about it in a letter to an old schoolmate in Kiev.

'And we now know it is correct', Shchepkin continued, 'that the military censor opened this letter. The signature was illegible, but because the envelope bore the stamp of your unit, the censor entrusted the matter to us to discover the identity of the man who wrote this letter and forbid him from returning to

the front. Is this your letter?' He showed me the letter.

'Yes.'

'You've got off lightly,' said Shchepkin. 'From what I hear we are losing a good worker, but there's nothing to be done about it. I'll ask you to turn in your papers at once and collect what's still owed you.'

I had been so intent on getting back to my unit, and this came as a harsh and devastating blow. I didn't go home but walked over to the Tretyakov Gallery. It was empty. The old women attendants dozed in their corners. A warm draught emanated from the radiators. I sat down in front of Flavitsky's *Princess Tarakanova*.[2] I stared at it for a long time, over an hour. I stared because the woman in the painting looked like Lëlya. I didn't want to go home. Now I finally realised that I had no home to go to.

[1] Dmitry Shchepkin (1879–1937), lawyer, economist, political figure, executed under Stalin.

[2] Konstantin Flavitsky's (1830–66) best-known painting, which depicts the legendary death of the eighteenth-century pretender to the Russian throne (1864).

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The Suburb of Chechelevka

In February Mama and Galya left for Kiev. I stayed in Moscow, hoping to find a job. Just then Uncle Kolya, an artillery engineer, was transferred from Bryansk to Moscow and attached to the French military mission. The mission had been sent to Russia to organise the manufacture of high-explosive grenades. Aunt Marusya joined Uncle Kolya in Moscow. They were given a government flat in a little building on 1st Meshchanskaya Street.

French artillerists from the mission often dined at their flat. I was invited to a few of these meals and liked to observe the Frenchmen. Their light blue uniforms smelled of eau-de-Cologne. Most of the officers brought Aunt Marusya flowers, and they were to a man exceedingly courteous. But beneath the charm and exquisite manners, I caught a whiff of Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*.

This was most apparent after some Russian vodka. They joked and roared with laughter, the noise grew louder, and then they all broke into a song about a station master. The song, a favourite of French railway passengers, had been composed with the sole intent of driving station masters mad with rage. As the station master came out onto the platform to see the train off, the passengers would line up at their open windows and begin to sing in time with the rhythm of the wheels – first slowly and then faster and faster – as they bowed in unison like Chinese puppets. '*Il est cocu, le chef de gare. Il est cocu, le chef de gare*,' went the song over and over. 'He's a cuckold, the station master. He's a cuckold, the station master.'

The officers mimicked the scene. Their old colonel, who had a little yellow beard, was particularly funny as the station master.

Sometimes the officers quarrelled, and you could almost smell gunpowder in the air of Uncle Kolya's small dining room and imagine the men reaching for their swords. Eyes flashed, thin moustaches twitched, insults flew across the table, until finally the colonel raised a hand in his fine tailored shirt. In an instant, everyone fell silent.

According to Uncle Kolya, the officers were knowledgeable engineers. The colonel was considered one of France's leading metallurgists and had written several books on the subject. Uncle Kolya had connections at a number of metallurgical works. I asked him if he could get me a job as a factory hand somewhere. He was not in the least surprised by my request and found a position for me as an inspector of shell casings at the Bryansk Works in Yekaterinoslav.

But first I was required to get some training at a factory in Moscow on inspection methods and the working of hydraulic presses. Casings in those days were made on such presses. I was sent to the Gustav List Works on the Sofiiskaya Embankment. I began by learning to read blueprints – smudgy drawings of the component parts of hydraulic presses on pages of blue paper. You could go blind trying to read them. I was also taught how to use sophisticated measuring instruments to inspect the quality of casings and fuses.

I returned home from the works to our deserted flat. Mama had sold the little furniture we had, and it was now empty as a barn. All that remained was a camp bed and a chair. I liked the solitude. No one interrupted my reading until all hours of the night. I was free to smoke and think. I thought about all the books I knew I just had to write. I ended up writing completely different books, but that's another matter.

Soon I left Moscow. I boarded the wrong train and had to get off at Rzhava, south of Kursk. I sat here for a few hours waiting for my train, which was running late. The wait didn't bother me. I enjoyed sitting in the third-class waiting room, reading the timetables, listening to the bells and punctuated tapping of the telegraph machine, and going out onto the platform to watch the express trains rush through. They went so fast the small station shook. I walked around in the nearby fields. Spring had already arrived here. The snowbanks had shrunk into the ground and those that remained were riddled with holes like pumice stone. Clouds of jackdaws circled and cawed. At that moment, and at many since then, I wanted to walk off into those wet fields of spring and never come back.

In Yekaterinoslav I rented part of a room in a house in the suburb of Chechelevka, not far from the Bryansk Works. I was down to my last twelve roubles. The house belonged to the widowed lathe

operator. He lived with his only child, a 25-year-old daughter named Glasha, who was ill with tuberculosis. I had rented for myself one corner of the kitchen. A riveter from the Bryansk Works – a tall fellow with wild eyes – had rented another corner. I never heard him make a sound. He never once responded to any of my questions, as if he were stone deaf. Every night he brought back with him on his way home from the factory a bottle of cloudy Yekaterinoslav *boza*, drank it down, passed out in his clothes on his shabby mattress on the floor, and slept as if dead until the first factory whistle blew in the morning.

Our landlord had a black moustache and talked almost as little as the riveter. He was utterly indifferent to us lodgers. Nevertheless, he did once speak to me: 'You're some kind of student, right? You might give me some sort of book to read. It'd help clear my head.'

I had no books. He was silent and then said: 'If Glasha weren't sick I'd marry her off. To you. You've got some sort of future. I see you up all night writing. If you two got married, you wouldn't have to lie about there under the sink. The tap's always running, dripping. Can't imagine you can get much sleep.'

He said all this in a bored way, as though just to make conversation, without really expecting anything to come of it. That night I heard Glasha tell him off through the door: 'Why do you have to bother every lodger with your nonsense? You're always trying to pawn me off on someone. I'm not some lazy mouth you have to feed. I'm the one doing all the work around here.'

'You goose,' said her father unperturbed, almost tenderly. 'You broody hen, you! It's your happiness I'm thinking of. You can't spend your whole life in that little room of yours, staring at the wallpaper.'

'There's no happiness left for me in this life,' said Glasha. She burst into tears. 'You yourself don't know why you had me. You can't bear to think about it. My life will be over by the spring.'

Her father left the house in a temper. Having dried her tears, Glasha came out into the kitchen to ask whether I could give her something to read – something about undying love. Her face was heavily powdered. The powder together with the underlying paleness of her face made it look as though she were wearing a cardboard mask. She reeked of sugary-sweet perfume. I told her I didn't have any love stories, certainly none about undying love.

'Oh, I'm so sick of you lodgers!' she said.

She locked herself in her room, wound up her old gramophone and put on a record of nonsense songs by the popular Moscow clowns Bim and Bom:

> Lucretia did fry up,
> Some dumplings in a pawnshop,
> While Monna Giovanna did quicken
> To douse with perfume her chicken.

Often at night Glasha had coughing fits. Gasping, she would say to the walls: 'O Lord, if only some kind person would come along and shoot me like a dog.' Feeling sorry for her I borrowed a copy of Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, the story of the sailor Gilliat's undying love, from the local library. She devoured the book in one night. I was lying on my mattress on the floor reading. The riveter was grinding his teeth in his sleep. Suddenly, the door to Glasha's room sprang open and Hugo's book flew through the air, pages scattering this way and that, before it smacked onto the floor next to my mattress.

'Keep it!' shouted Glasha. 'Keep your filthy book! It's poison! I hope your Frenchman chokes on it. It's all lies! He lies like a dog! Nothing of the sort ever happened. It couldn't! Would I be living like this if such a man existed? I'd have found him by now if he did, and I'd worship the ground he walked on.'

'Such men do exist,' I said. 'And stop shouting!'

'Shouting, am I? Now there's a bit of news. What would you rather I do, sing? How about "Everyone says I'm frivolous, / Everyone says I've many lovers!" Or would you rather I dance the maxixe? I hate you!' she shouted, knocking the gramophone off the table. 'I hate you! I wish I'd never laid eyes on you! May you burn in hell!'

She tore off a loose strip of wallpaper. Dust flew. The riveter jumped up and ran to the sink to wash. He thought he had heard the morning's first whistle. Just then the lathe operator came in. He tried to grab Glasha by the arms, but she broke free, and with blazing eyes and clenched teeth, her skin a deathly white, she tore at the wallpaper, strip by strip, until the room looked black and bare, as though it had been turned inside out.

The soft blue of a spring dawn shone through the window. It all ended when Glasha began coughing up blood and was taken to the factory hospital. The lathe operator started to drink. The riveter was unfazed by the state of the flat or the fate of the landlord and just went on downing his nightly bottle of *boza* and sleeping in until his next shift.

Soon after Glasha's death the riveter moved out and the flat became empty. One evening, as I lay alone

in the flat on my mattress reading, I heard a soft but insistent knock at the door. I opened it. It was Bugaenko, from my workshop at the factory. Normally a quiet, sarcastic sort of fellow, he was obviously upset.

'Can I come in?' he said. 'I need to talk to you.' He gazed at the bare black walls and sighed. 'You've had bad luck ending up here. The landlord's a fool. You should move.'

'I won't be staying here in Yekaterinoslav much longer,' I said. 'It's not worth it.'

'He's a fool,' Bugaenko repeated. 'He's drowning himself in vodka, trying to run away from life and his comrades. He's an embarrassment to the proletariat. Most of us are stronger than that.'

'I know,' I said. 'The workers you've got there are among the best.'

'That's what I wanted to talk to you about. We've had our eye on you for some time now. You must have noticed.'

'But why?' I asked, nervously.

'We've been trying to figure you out,' replied Bugaenko. He grinned. 'You have to be careful around others nowadays. It's hard to know who you can trust.'

'So, what have you figured out?'

Bugaenko sat down, lit a cigarette and started talking, almost as if he were speaking to himself. He said that they had observed me for quite some time until becoming convinced, in his words, that although I was not part of the revolutionary movement, nonetheless I was someone with possibilities. The thing was, they wanted to put out a leaflet attacking the arbitrary nature of rule in the country, but they had no one to write it. It would be good if I, clearly an educated man, would write the leaflet for them. They, the workers, would look it over and then 'put it into circulation'.

I said yes. I wrote the leaflet, filling it with as much pathos as I could muster. I like to think the ghost of Victor Hugo watched over me as I wrote.

Bugaenko wasn't pleased. 'You missed the target,' he said. 'It's good, it's well written, polished, but beautiful writing tends to smooth things over, it calms people down, which is all fine and good, but only when called for. What we need is clarity. It has to be simple so everyone can understand it, even the most illiterate. It has to make them angry, so angry that they want to act. Their hands should ball into hard fists as they read it. I know this isn't easy. It's harder than writing something pretty. Give it another try.'

I worked hard on it for several nights in a row before I managed to put down on paper something simple and direct. The leaflet was copied on a hectograph machine and then pasted on the factory walls and circulated among the workers. I was proud of my work but, unfortunately, my authorship had to be kept a secret. I wanted to keep one copy for myself as a memento, but Bugaenko took it from me, saying I was a lousy conspirator. Still, he was pleased with the leaflet. Smiling at me through his trimmed, tobacco-stained moustache and shifting into Ukrainian dialect, he said: 'Oh yes, some fine Cossack boys we've got here in our little Zaporozhian troop.'

My job at the works was to inspect the shell casings. They were stacked up in piles on trestle tables. I shone a small electric torch into each case, checking for blisters and overburns. Next I measured the diameter with callipers. I marked each defective shell with a cross in white chalk. There were a lot of them. The old women in our crew carted them back to the smelters.

I worked next to a large circular saw that cut the metal into pieces. The shriek it made was unbearable. It sent cold shivers down my spine and set every single nerve on edge. It bored into my brain like a drill. I thought I was going deaf and blind from the racket and would have blown that saw up with a bomb if I could have. A worse assault on one's brain, heart, nerves – on one's entire being – would be hard to imagine. It was even worse when the saw stopped, because we stood there in terror waiting for it to start up again. The anticipation made one sick. Within minutes, the saw howled back into life in triumph and began once again to cut metal with its savage, whirling teeth amid a fountain of burning red sparks.

I did not report to the factory boss, but to the representative of the Artillery Command attached to the Bryansk Works, a Captain Velyaminov, sent down from Petrograd. I was required to go and see him every three or four days with an update on my work. For a long time I couldn't think of who he reminded me of, until finally it came to me: the Decembrist Yakubovich.[1] Velyaminov had the same lean face, dark drooping moustache and black bandage over his forehead.

Velyaminov lived on Bolshoi Avenue. The windows of his room looked out onto the river Dnieper and the surrounding gardens. The trees were now in full bud. The barely perceptible greenish haze of early spring hung in the air. Velyaminov's room was cluttered with blueprints, books and all sorts of things that had nothing to do with his work in artillery.

He had a passion for photography and the local history of Russia's forgotten towns and villages. The windowsills were crowded with flasks, graduated glasses and trays for developing and printing. The

room had the acidic smell of fixing solution. Photographs lay beside a potted philodendron on a round table covered with a velvet cloth. They were views of provincial towns – Porkhov, Gdov, Valdai, Loev, Roslavl and many others. Velayminov found some interesting feature in each of them to photograph. Smoke curling from the ever-present cigarette in his mouth, he would tell me in a smug but excited voice about all of his discoveries as he showed me the photographs. It might be a wooden gate from the era of Peter the Great, or simply a fancy balustrade on a balcony, sometimes a row of shops, or maybe a watchtower straight out of Gogol.

Velyaminov spent every holiday travelling to forgotten, out-of-the-way places. He visited the decaying country manors of the provincial nobility to photograph their collections of paintings, exquisite tiled stoves and sculptures still preserved in their crumbling ballrooms and neglected gardens, and then took the photographs back to Petrograd with him to show his friends who were connoisseurs of art. With restrained pride he told me how he had managed to find the grave of Pushkin's nanny, Arina Rodionovna, in the village of Suida near Luga, as well as a bust by the noted sculptor Kozlovsky[2] and two paintings by the French artist Poussin in a boarded-up mansion near Cherepovets.

I loved to sit there for hours looking at Velyaminov's photographs. He served me tea from a thermos and sausage sandwiches. It was nice and warm in his cluttered room. I kept putting off leaving for Chechelevka and the bare kitchen where the rust-coloured cockroaches, practically transparent from hunger, raced up and down the walls. One day Velyaminov said: 'It's time you stopped moping in that place over in Chechelevka and going deaf from that saw. I'm sending you to Taganrog. It's a wonderful town. Along the way I'm going to have you stop at Yuzovka and look in on the Novorossiisk Factory so you can show them how they ought to be inspecting the casings. It shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks. Does that sound good to you?'

Needless to say, I said yes, it did. Before parting, he gave me my pay and money for the journey and promised to come and see me in Taganrog in the summer.

Back in the kitchen at Chechelevka I hardly slept all night. We had to leave the light on to keep the cockroaches away. In the dark they would slither out of the walls and crawl all over our faces and hands. As I lay there, a crazy idea came to me: why not put off going to Yuzovka for five or six days and use the time to visit Sevastopol? Velyaminov would never know. I had been to Sevastopol once as a boy on the way from Kiev to Alushta with my entire family and had never forgotten it. I had often dreamed about it – a small, picturesque town bathed in the sea's reflected light and smelling of seaweed and the smoke of steamships.

Water dripped from the tap, the cockroaches drank from a small puddle on the floor, a drunk sobbed and yelled in the street below – 'Shoot me, Judas! Stab me in the back!' – but none of it bothered me. I could already smell, as I dozed off, the almond-scented air of Sevastopol's gardens.

[1] Alexander Yakubovich (1792–1845), among the Decembrists sentenced to death, later commuted. Pëtr Karatygin's 1825 portrait of Yakubovich shows him with a dark bandage over his forehead.

[2] Mikhail Kozlovsky (1753–1802), Neoclassical sculptor.

65

One Day

They asked to see my travel permit for Sevastopol in the booking office. I didn't have one, so I bought a ticket as far as Bakhchisarai. I was certain I'd find a way to get to Sevastopol from there. The old clerk felt sorry for me. 'All these regulations!' he sighed. 'And all because of the *Empress Maria*.'

The tragic loss of the *Empress Maria*, the mightiest battleship in the Black Sea Fleet, was a mystery.[1] At the time the whole world was talking about it. While anchored in Sevastopol's Northern Bay it suddenly exploded for no apparent reason and sank. Shortly before the explosion, a number of 'august personages', including members of Empress Alexandra Fëdorovna's own suite, toured the ship. It was said that one of them must have placed several little bombs – no bigger than champagne corks – with timers at key points throughout the vessel. This was not the only such incident. Ships loaded with arms crossing the Atlantic for Europe also often exploded or caught fire. Many believed they were being sunk by small bombs tossed into the coal upon refuelling.

I stood for a long time in the train's vestibule looking out of the window. The southern night was descending, warm and impenetrable. At every stop I opened the door and stuck my head out to listen. I could hear a faint rustle coming from the darkness. It must have been the sound of the ground drying out after the melt of the final snow.

I regretted every stop and rejoiced at every verst marker that I saw fly past in the dim light from the carriage window. In those days there was no electricity on the trains, only candles. The dimly lit carriages were a good place to imagine one's future, which in that atmosphere always appeared alluring and exciting. The other imaginary world, of which I have written, became startlingly real. I gave myself over to it completely, without the least bit of remorse. It was too dark to read or write on the train, so what else was there to do but let my imagination wander? Assuming, of course, one wasn't bothered by importunate fellow travellers.

Luckily, on this particular journey I wasn't. The only other person in the vestibule was a young sailor in a black greatcoat. He kept singing the same song over and over, but just the first few lines before stopping and starting again. All I can remember are a few words: 'There was an awful commotion, at Dzhankoi station . . .' I never did learn what sort of commotion it had been, even though we passed through Dzhankoi station in the early hours of the morning.

After that, I kept staring out into the dark hoping to catch a glimpse of the spurs of the Crimean Mountains, but all I could see were the lights of Simferopol.

The station platform in Simferopol was empty. It was nearly dawn. A wind blew from the mountains. The poplars shook their leaves in the station square. The windows of the station's buffet were brightly lit. Almond twigs stood in vases alongside silver champagne buckets on a long table. A sunburned young sailor sat with his elbows up on a table, smoking a cigarette and flicking ash onto the floor. When the train started, he sauntered out of the buffet and neatly swung himself up into the last carriage. The guard passed through the carriages snuffing out the candles. In the tranquil blue of dawn the ancient land unfolded before me: the mountain peaks lit by the rising sun, crystalline streams rushing over rocky beds, plane trees and the magical luminescence of the sky, out there, far off in the distance, towards which our train raced, leaving in its wake a long narrow cloud of the softest pink steam.

I got off in Bakhchisarai. The guard told me the easiest way to get to Sevastopol was by catching the local train that night out of Simferopol. All I had to do was give the policeman three roubles.

I had no choice but to spend the day in Bakhchisarai. It was a compact little town, the alleyways paved with worn flagstones. Water gurgled in its many fountains. Women collected the water in copper jugs. As the water rushed into the jugs, it made a sound that changed quickly from a high treble note to a low bass. This water music amazed me. It seemed to come from one of those imaginary countries that I had dreamed up. I began to wonder whether everything I thought I had imagined actually existed, that these places were not part of my make-believe world but were real lands that I simply hadn't yet visited.

Everything was new to me here – especially the fountains. I had never seen fountains like these before. Instead of a steady stream of water spouting from the bronze beaks of herons or the mouths of dolphins, water here poured lazily from openings in flat stones set flush into the walls. The famous Fountain of

Tears in the Palace of the Khans was unlike any fountain I had encountered. The water dripped slowly, like tears, from one shell to another, down and down it trickled, barely making a sound.

I went to a small café. Every time an oxcart passed by the ramshackle glass-walled structure shook and rattled. Outside on the verandah pigeons softly cooed as they waddled to and fro under the wobbly tables. The windows at the back looked out over a gorge of yellow sandstone overgrown with thorn bushes. A road led along the side of the gorge to the cave city of Chufut-Kale.[2]

What a life! I thought, sitting on the verandah. Fuchsias in vases set out on the tables nodded their reddish-black flowers, as if in agreement. What a life! Romanin was right when he used to say that what we had now wasn't life, but a series of 'encounters with history and geography'. I had hungered for such encounters. And now I had them. I had to admit that the changes in my life of late had held more grief than happiness. But despite these misfortunes, I felt that my youth, as powerful, so it seemed to me, as the sea that stretches out like an infinite blue wall to the horizon, could ease the sense of failure and loss.

I paid for my coffee and headed off for Chufut-Kale. I had no idea what a cave city was until I saw a sheer yellow cliff-face honeycombed with hundreds of windows. I climbed a steep path up to a flat ledge at the top of the cliff and suddenly found myself in a world so ancient it didn't seem real. Deep tracks had been hacked into the limestone, yellow with lichens. Heavy carts had left behind deep ruts. Low doorways led into cave dwellings. Lizards scurried about on the altar of a small underground basilica. Who had carved this city out of this mountain of stone? No one could tell me since there wasn't a soul in sight.

Carpets of tiny purple flowers covered every patch of stony soil between the cliffs. They had a beautiful five-petal shape, although a magnifying glass would be needed to look at them properly. A thin bay horse grazed among the rock walls. It often stopped and nodded off, its back twitching every time wasps landed on it.

I climbed higher up one of the cliffs and sat down. The rocks were warm to the touch. Before me I saw a majestic semi-circle of flat-topped hills like Chufut-Kale. I was alone up here in this airy wilderness. Sheep far off down below became clumps of dirty wool. I could clearly hear the clanking of their bells. I didn't want to move. I lay down and closed my eyes. The sky shimmered with a blue flame. Sharp rays of rainbow-coloured light flickered over my eyelashes. Looking up, I saw an eagle soaring overhead. It seemed to be watching me and trying to decide whether or not to come down and pay a visit.

I became aware of the faint sound of dripping water. I turned round and saw a tiny rivulet, as thin as a fine necklace, trickling out of a crack in the next rock and hastily releasing its drops like so many beads. I fell asleep. When I awoke the sky still burned, but not with the blue light of earlier. It was now a savage ochre. Strange crimson clouds – feathers, plumes, columns, islands and mighty mountain peaks – stretched from horizon to horizon. The sun was setting. Its copper disc spread an angry glow over the rocky cliffs. With every minute this incredible evening fire grew harsher and ruder. It burned and burned until it reached the culmination of incandescence only to go out in a flash. And just like that, the sun had set. Immediately, a cold wind stirred the brambles. I made my way back down. The fountains of Bakhchisarai sounded louder now than by daylight.

I drank another cup of coffee in the same café – I didn't have enough for any food – and then headed to the station, hungry but light-hearted and excited. The train arrived at five o'clock in the morning. I didn't buy a ticket, but just climbed in and stood in the vestibule at the end of the carriage. A strapping policeman appeared immediately. He had spotted me getting on the train. It hadn't been difficult: I was the only one to board at Bakhchisarai.

'Your permit?' he asked, smiling.

I offered him three roubles. He took the money, saluted casually with one finger, and walked on. I remained standing in the vestibule.

I stood glued to the window, anxious to finally catch sight of the sea. It was getting light outside. The train's roar echoed as we passed through the overhanging cliffs. In an instant, the train shot out into the open and crossed a gorge over a bridge that shook lightly under our weight. Then the carriages were flung sideways as the train rounded a sharp bend. A hillside of yellow flowers flashed briefly before my eyes. The curly leaves of a vineyard flew by and then once again the hollow thunder of an overhang buffeted the carriage. The jagged cliffs were so close I didn't dare put out my hand.

The greenish water of the sea hit me in the face after we exploded from the final tunnel. The broad Northern Bay lay out on the horizon, twisting and turning before receding into the dry haze. Nothing was moving outside the windows, but the speeding train made it seem as though everything was twisting, turning and flashing – the black schooners lying keel up on the beach, the grey battle cruisers, the long minesweepers, the buoys, flags, guard ships, masts, tiled roofs, fishing nets, bollards, acacias and the empty tin cans tossed along the beach that shot off flames of reflected sun. And then finally, amid curls

of smoke, the city lay before me in the form of an amphitheatre, almost as though covered with the bronze patina of its fame.

Brakes hissing, the train fearlessly tore into a tangle of streets, courtyards, breastworks and stairways, going up and down slope after slope, until finally coming to a stop at a handsome station.

I have seen a great many cities, but none finer than Sevastopol.

The Black Sea came up almost to its very doorsteps. It filled the rooms with its sound, its breeze, its scent. Small, open-decked trams cautiously navigated the hillsides, fearful of slipping into the water. Bell buoys clanged out by the wharf. On the edge of the market, next to the zinc-lined bins and the piles of flounders and pinkish goatfish, the small waves lapped against the creaking hulls of the *shalandas*, the local flat-bottomed fishing boats. Breakers rolled in from the open sea, beating against the round bastions of the fortress. Warships stood smoking in the roadstead.

Sirens wailed, bottles clinked, calling out to the jingling of the trams and the peal of the church bells. Straining against their taut anchor chains, passenger steamers hooted with displeasure. At sunset came the sound of bugles from the warships striking their colours. The mournful sound travelled far over the still water. It was soon replaced by waltzes from Primorsky Boulevard, music so soft and lilting it might be coming not from the orchestra, but from twilight itself as it sang to sleep the last waves circling about the Monument to Sunken Ships.

I walked around the city until I was ready to drop, always finding one more alluring corner to explore. I especially loved the steps of porous yellow sandstone that connected the upper and lower town. Houses stood on rocky ledges on both sides, connected to the landings by narrow, ivy-covered hanging bridges. The windows and balcony doors stood open, and from the steps it was easy to hear everything going on inside the houses: children laughing, women talking, the clatter of dishes, piano scales, singing, dogs barking, the tinny screech of parrots. For some reason there were a lot of parrots then in Sevastopol.

Fearing a sneak attack by the German fleet, the city was dark at night. But the blackout wasn't complete. The shop blinds pulled down over the windows had letters cut out in them through which their interior lights shone. The streets now glowed mysteriously, as though lit from below by fiery words: PASTRY SHOP, MINERAL WATER, BEER, FRUIT.

Talkative women sold violets in large baskets on the pavement late into the night. They kept a candle burning on a stool next to them. The flame scarcely quivered – the evening was calm. Crowds of sailors and their officers gathered in the streets. If not for the blackout and the searchlights sweeping the distant sky, there was nothing to suggest we were at war. No doubt this was how seaside towns looked during naval blockades in the early nineteenth century, when the danger wasn't that great. Clumsy enemy gunboats smoked offshore and lobbed cannonballs from their bronze barrels at the mossy walls of ancient forts. It wasn't war as we knew it. Now, the sense of danger felt exhilarating and filled the people of Sevastopol with that reckless gaiety considered to be the indispensable mark of the brave.

I sat in the gloaming until nightfall near the bastions of 1854. Below me lay the Southern Bay and beyond that the harbour. I was surrounded by blossoming almond trees. No other tree has such a pure and affecting scent. Their branches bedecked in rose-coloured flowers, they reminded me of brides before a wedding. The twilight gradually wrapped the unlit city in a deceptive haze. At first the air shimmered faintly with the gold of the dying sun, and then it acquired a clean silvery shade as the gold died away. The silver, too, quickly darkened, losing its transparency and being covered by a deep, impenetrable blue. Once the blue had been extinguished as well, night descended.

I left the bastions for the station in the hope of getting a ticket and boarding the train without having to show a permit. The train was scheduled to leave later that night. The first porter I asked agreed to get me a ticket.

'The train won't leave for another three hours,' he said. 'A young fellow like you, you don't want to sit around bored in the station. Go have a look around our beautiful town.'

I headed off to the tram stop, thinking about the simple kindness of these southerners, but just then a patrol – two sailors with rifles and armbands – marched up. They demanded my identity papers.

'Where do you live?' one of the sailors asked. 'What street?'

I admitted I wasn't from Sevastopol.

'Right!' he said. 'Not that you have to be. But we've got to take you in to see the warrant officer. And don't get any ideas about wriggling out of it. He can see right through anybody.'

They took me along. On the way, one of them asked: 'How much did you give the porter?'

'Ten roubles.'

'Here's your money.' He handed me a ten-rouble note.

I turned round expecting to see the porter watching me being led off with malicious joy, but it was too dark to see a thing.

They took me to a small building not far from Nakhimovsky Avenue. Sitting on the windowsill in a vaulted room was a wiry, hook-nosed officer and a girl in a short, checked skirt. She was playing with her two light brown plaits and swinging a crossed leg. A worn old shoe dangled precariously from her big toe. Another warrant officer in full uniform – greatcoat, cap, black revolver on a patent leather belt – sat at a desk. The sailors gave their report and left the room. The officer at the desk took my papers and lit a cigarette, wincing from some smoke that got in his eyes.

'Hmmmm, yep!' the man with the revolver announced after carefully going through my papers. 'The little bird strode blithely down the path to disaster, never bothering to think who was following after.'

The girl, still swinging her leg, laughed and gave me a look.

'All right then!' Revolver said. 'Tell me, in all honesty, just who and what are you, why you're here in Sevastopol, and how come you tried to slip out of town unnoticed? Your papers are in order, not that it means anything.'

Embarrassed, I told him the whole story.

'Aha!' he said, satisfied with my explanation. 'So, it's all because of your artistic nature? Some sort of bohemian, eh?'

'Sasha, stop fooling around!' said Hook-Nose. The officer with the revolver ignored the comment.

'If you're able to prove to me that you are by nature a poet and that you've been lured here by the passion for travel, then maybe, just maybe, we can come to some sort of agreement,' Revolver said.

I couldn't tell if he was making fun of me or not but decided to at least pretend that I took him at his word.

'Sasha, if Admiral Eberhardt knew about your techniques of investigation,' said Hook-Nose, 'there's no way you'd avoid the barge.'

'The barge' was the name for Sevastopol's floating prison.

'A poet must know some lines by heart,' declared Revolver, still ignoring Hook-Nose. 'What can you say to that?'

I wasn't quite sure what he meant.

'Recite some sort of poem for him. He's a poet himself,' the girl explained.

'Something like "And the Lord did send the raven a little piece of cheese",' Hook-Nose said to me, snickering.

'No,' I said. 'If that's what you want, then I'll recite for you something by Leconte de Lisle.'

'Well, just look at you! Very impressive,' replied Revolver, full of surprise. 'No, that won't do. How about you recite for us some Blok – something like "I shall never forget it". But if you want your permit, I advise you not to forget a word.'

'Enough clowning from you, young man,' said Hook-Nose, whose words were ignored yet again.

I recited Blok's poem. I liked it myself. The sailors pounded their rifles on the floor in the corridor. It seemed they were quite surprised.

'Well, I'll be damned!' said Revolver, putting on a frustrated expression. 'Isn't there someone here in Sevastopol who could vouch for you?'

'No,' I answered.

'I'll vouch for him, Sasha,' said Hook-Nose. 'Enough of this foolishness. It's obvious what kind of fellow he is. Write out his permit. I'll write out a guarantee for you tomorrow.'

Revolver grinned and then slowly, and with considerable effort, began writing out the permit. As he wrote, the rest of us started talking about poetry. Hook-Nose liked Fofanov, the girl preferred Mirra Lokhvitskaya.[3] She blushed and said that she wished there were time for her to recite a poem of her own, but it was too long.

'Here!' said Revolver, handing me my papers and a permit. He sighed. 'It's too bad you're leaving. We could meet once I'm off duty. There's plenty we could talk about.'

I thanked him and said that Sevastopol was clearly a city of wonders. Nowhere else could my arrest have ended so happily.

'My dear and rather naïve young man,' said Revolver, 'Sevastopol is no city of wonders. Keep in mind – spies and other shady characters never confide in porters. Now that's a good epigram, don't you think?'

We said goodbye. The girl and Hook-Nose offered to see me to the top of the hill overlooking the station. Revolver looked disappointed. It was obvious he wished he, too, could walk through the nighttime streets of Sevastopol with the brown-haired girl. Along the way, she said to me: 'Come back and see us sometime. I live on Green Hill, number five. My name's Rita. Everyone knows me there. Oh, it's really too bad you're leaving. There are so few of us here in Sevastopol!'

'Us?'

'Poets, of course. There's just the two of them, and myself. Wait, there's also a student from Kharkov.'

The same porter came up to me. He was grinning from ear to ear. ‘Well then,’ he said. ‘All straightened out? That’s better. You don’t have to worry, and I won’t get in trouble. Give me a fiver. I’ll go and get you a ticket.’

The smell of seaweed drifted in through the open windows of the carriage. The white rivers of the searchlights poured into the dark depths of the sea and vanished there without a trace. I was sorry to be leaving this city and to see this happy day – the first after many weary months – come to an end.

[1] The battleship *Empress Maria* sank after a fire on board led to a magazine explosion in October 1915, killing hundreds of sailors. The precise cause of the explosion remains unknown.

[2] An ancient fortified cave city, now in ruins, possibly dating back to the fifth century CE.

[3] Konstantin Fofanov (1862–1911), popular and widely imitated poet; Mirra Lokhvitskaya (1869–1905), poet, known as the ‘Russian Sappho’.

66

The Hotel Great Britain

In Yuzovka I took a cheap room in the Hotel Great Britain. This fetid dump had been named in honour of Hughes and Balfour,[1] two Englishmen who owned enormous factories and mines in the Don Basin.

Today there is nothing left of old Yuzovka. What had once been a dirty and shabby town ringed by wooden huts and earthen hovels is now a pleasant, well-ordered city. These nasty areas went by a number of nicknames all reflecting a black humour commensurate with their miserable appearance: 'She-Devil', 'Bitch', 'Dark Angel'. In the same hollow as the town stood the Novorossiisk Factory, where I had been sent to work. Smoke belched from its massive chimneys and poured from its various workshops. The smoke was the yellow of fox fur and stank like scorched milk.

An extraordinary crimson flame danced above the tops of the blast furnaces. Greasy soot dripped from the sky. Due to the smoke and soot, the colour white had disappeared from Yuzovka. Everything that had started out white had turned a dirty grey with yellowish blotches: grey curtains, grey sheets and pillowcases, grey shirts. Even white horses, cats and dogs had turned a dingy, yellow-speckled grey.

It seldom rained in Yuzovka, and a hot wind blew day and night to form clouds of rubbish, coal dust and chicken feathers. Every street and courtyard was covered in sunflower shells. The layer grew thicker after every holiday. The locals had their own word for chewing sunflower seeds. 'Husking' they called it. Every last person in Yuzovka husked. It was rare to encounter someone without bits of sunflower shell stuck to their chin. Many locals were true virtu osos in the art of husking, particularly the women gossiping at their front gates. They husked unbelievably fast and had a miraculous way of flicking the seeds into their mouths with their thumbnails, never once missing their target.

Husking at their gates still left them plenty of time to badmouth their neighbours, as only lower-middle-class women in the south know how – in dirty, evil language tinged with an element of naïve impudence. Every one of these women was, of course, 'the queen of her yard'. When not husking and gossiping, the women would fight. As soon as two women flew at each other, screeching and clawing at each other's hair, a cackling crowd formed around them. An old drunk would whip off his torn cap and pass it around taking bets – two kopecks on the favourite. It often happened that the women had been intentionally provoked.

Sometimes the fight grew and grew and got out of control. It wasn't long before the whole street joined in. Men rushed out of their houses pulling up their trousers and carrying lead-tipped whips and knuckledusters. Noses were broken and eyes blackened, blood flowed. Then, from the 'New World', where the managers of the mines and factories lived, a Cossack patrol trotted up and scattered the combatants with their horses and their lashes.

It was difficult to understand who these inhabitants of Yuzovka were. The hotel's imperturbable porter told me they were 'hangers-on' – rag-and-bone merchants, money lenders, market women, kulaks, tavern owners, all of them feeding off the workers and miners from the nearby villages. Factories belched smoke from all sides. Dusty, grey pyramids of slag from the mines lined the horizon.

The Hotel Great Britain deserves to be described, like some long-extinct fossil.

Its walls had originally been painted the colour of rancid beef. After some time the hotel's owner came to find this uninspiring and had them redone with murals in the then fashionable 'Decadent' style – white and purple irises and the heads of women peeping out coquettishly from behind water lilies. The entire hotel reeked of cheap face powder, strong medicines and burnt fat from the kitchen. The electric lights produced nothing more than a smudgy yellow glow, too dim to read by. The beds had broken springs and a deep valley down the middle. The young maids 'received guests' at any hour of the day or night. Downstairs, sickly-looking youths wearing bow-ties and caps cocked at a raffish angle played snooker on the table's torn and patched baize. Every night someone got his head bashed in with a cue. The stakes were high. The money was kept in the pockets of the billiard table. The players never took their eyes off it since quick-fingered petty crooks lurked about waiting for their opportunity.

The walls between the rooms were thin. At night I heard sighs, moans, arguments and, sometimes, women's bloodcurdling screams. When that happened, the porter was summoned, the door was broken in, a sobbing woman in dishevelled clothing – usually one of the hotel maids – ran from the room, and

some drunken youth with a sweaty mop of hair was dragged out, cursing and swinging left and right at anyone within reach. He was tied up and given a stern lecture as they pushed him out of the hotel and took him away: 'Cheated that poor girl again, didn't you? You dog. Hanging's too good for you!' The maids rushed to the girl's side. Still sobbing, she showed them the few coins – proof she had been swindled – clutched in her fist. They counted the money and gasped, insisting in unison that all men deserved to be drowned in sulphuric acid.

A regular participant in these scandals was a short, grey-haired commercial traveller – a representative of Mandel & Company, purveyors of ready-to-wear clothing. He wore a loose-fitting cherry-red suit and sturdy yellow shoes with bulging toes. He always comforted the insulted women.

'Musya, you oughtn't to take it so much to heart,' he would say. 'You need to adopt a more philosophical approach to such matters. Just look at me.'

'You know what you can do with your advice!' Musya replied through her tears. 'I hope you choke on all your helpful ideas. I know all about you and your philosophy!'

'The ancient Greeks', he went on, unperturbed, 'believed that serenity was the ultimate foundation of happiness. The ultimate foundation! Understand? *Ultima ratio*! And so, how much, ultimately, did he cheat you out of ?'

'A rouble, the snake!' she said, having stopped crying.

'Here's a rouble for you. Now dry your tears, fix yourself up all nice and pretty as you were before, and then bring a bottle of wine, another of Borjomi and some biscuits to my room.'

'You know where you can go!' said the girl indignantly. 'Think you can have me for a rouble? You smelly old rat!'

He took no offence. Hands in his pockets, the old man just strolled up and down the corridor, singing:

> Beneath an Argentine sky so sultry,
> Where the women, like pictures, are so lovely,
> And the southern breezes blow quite softly,
> Dear Joey fell in love with his little Chloë.

Everyone's favourite in the hotel was a lodger known as 'Uncle Grisha'. A beaten-down, quiet man with a brownish beard and baby-blue eyes, he went around in an alpaca jacket with nothing underneath. He kept the jacket wrapped tightly around his naked body out of modesty and was always shaking, though not from the cold but because he was perpetually hungover.

It was said that Uncle Grisha was the son of a senator from Petersburg, that he had graduated from college, squandered a great fortune in Paris, then had become a piano player in a cinema (or 'L'Illusion' as it was called), and now lived on charity and the odd rouble or two he earned at parties singing tragic romances and demonstrating his virtuosity on the guitar. Uncle Grisha was so miserable that even the hotel proprietor, an obese gentleman in a bowler hat and tight, checked trousers, took pity on him and gave him a job stoking the boiler that heated the water for tea. In return, Uncle Grisha lived for free in the small room with the boiler.

His cubbyhole became a sort of club room. Here the 'permanent residents' of the hotel gathered to play dominoes and cards (almost always *durak*[2]), told fortunes and discussed current events, while the maids darned socks, sewed or ironed.

Once a birthday party was thrown here for Lyuba, the second-floor maid. Four of the lodgers, including myself, were invited, 'out of respect'. The other three were Faina Abramovna, an elderly dentist; a tall man on crutches who worked for a Kharkov newspaper; and Albert, a chemist's assistant with delicate, freckled skin and an insolent smile plastered to his face. The old commercial traveller tried to gatecrash, but the maids wouldn't let him in. The girls were all done up in their finest, and Lyuba, pale and silent in a black dress, looked, in the words of Albert, like '*la reine Margot*'. Too excited to talk, Lyuba occasionally raised her long eyelashes and looked at us intently. Each time I was amazed by the innocent sparkle in her eyes.

It was hard to believe this was the same Lyuba who had been sobbing a few nights before, covering a breast with her torn muslin nightdress and pressing her round, bare knees together as she swore at the top of her lungs ('Bastard! Swine!') at the dirty, thick-set lodger from Room 34.

Uncle Grisha had shaved and put on a borrowed pink shirt fastened with a bronze tie pin in the shape of a lizard. We sat down at the table to a meal of leftover hors d'oeuvres from the hotel buffet and a few bottles of rowanberry vodka. In the centre stood a large bouquet of violet paper roses. Lyuba walked over to Uncle Grisha and stroked his few remaining hairs. He caught her hand and held it and, for a moment, Lyuba pressed his shaking head to her breast. She was looking over the top of it through the window and wore her typical calm expression. Flushed and happy, the girls kept offering us more food and vodka.

They looked us sweetly in the eyes, saying: ‘Please, do help yourselves. Let’s drink to Lyuba’s health and happiness. Come now, don’t be shy! It’s all quite fresh, straight from the kitchen, you needn’t worry.’

Lyuba sat between Uncle Grisha and me. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you,’ she said, ‘what is it you’re always writing? Every time I tidy your room, I keep finding little pieces of paper all over the place. What are you writing about? Something to do with happy lives filled with love and tenderness?’

‘Yes, Lyuba,’ I told her. ‘I’m writing about happy lives, about love and tenderness.’

‘Oh, if only my life were interesting,’ Lyuba sighed, ‘then maybe you could write something about me. A whole book even. People would read it and weep.’

‘Drink, Lyubka,’ Musya instructed her, ‘it’s the best thing to cure your grief.’

Lyuba’s eyes had darkened. ‘Shut up!’ she told Musya quietly. ‘I can handle my grief on my own.’

‘Sorry, Lyubka, I just meant I’m on your side,’ said Musya.

‘Do you also write songs?’ Lyuba asked, turning to me. ‘And by the way, don’t pay any attention to that fool Musya. Just ignore her.’

‘No, no songs. I used to write poems. I know a lot by heart.’

‘Romantic ones?’

‘Yes, some.’

‘Recite one.’

‘All right,’ I said. The vodka had gone to my head by now. ‘I’ll recite one, but just for you since it’s your birthday.’

‘Really, just for me?’ asked Lyuba, lightly tugging on the silver ring on my little finger. ‘Whose ring is this?’

‘Mine.’

‘It can’t be.’

The party had got noisy by now. I paused for a minute trying to think of something short and simple, but nothing came to mind. Oh well, I thought, either she understands it or she doesn’t. I began in a slightly sing-song voice:

> No, it’s not you I love so ardently,
> Not for me the radiance of your beauty:
> I love in you my past suffering
> And my lost youth.

Everyone fell silent.

> Sometimes when I look at you,
> And search your eyes intently:
> I engage in a mysterious conversation,
> Tho’ in my heart it’s to another I speak.

I stopped.

‘Well, go on!’ Lyuba said sharply. ‘Since you’ve started breaking our hearts, you might as well finish.’

> I speak to a girl of my younger days,
> In your features I seek those of another,
> In living lips, lips long silent,
> In living eyes, the fire of eyes long extinguished.

One of the girls drew a noisy breath and started to sob.

‘That’s Lermontov,’ said Uncle Grisha, tuning his guitar. ‘He’s better sung than recited.’ He strummed a soft chord and began to sing in a clear and pleasing tenor voice: ‘I set out alone on the road, the rocky path shining through the fog . . .’

‘Come on, everyone, join in!’ he ordered, and his guitar resumed its melancholy tune. ‘Everybody sing! “The night is still, the desert hearkens to God, the stars converse.”’

We all sang the end of the stanza softly together. Lyuba sat with her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her folded hands, gazing out of the window. Uncle Grisha played, his head raised, tears rolling down his cheeks. Just then the door flew open and in walked the dirty, thick-set lodger from Room 34. His lascivious eyes searched out Lyuba.

‘Lyubochka, my darling, I’ve been looking for you. Do come out for a minute. I simply must speak with you,’ he pleaded.

‘Talk?’ Lyuba asked. ‘You need to talk to me? In your room?’

‘Yes, why not, in my room. That would be best.’

Lyuba stood up. ‘You know what day it is. So why are you in here bothering me now, on my birthday? Can’t you stop pestering me? You’ll have to wait, you bastard, now get lost!’

‘Lyubka!’ Musya squealed, but it was too late. Lyuba had grabbed the bottle of rowanberry vodka and threw it at him with all her might. It hit him in the head and shattered. He put his hands to his fat face, now covered in blood and vodka, stumbled backwards out of the room, tripped over the threshold and crashed to the floor.

‘I’ll kill you!’ Lyuba shouted wildly. ‘I’ll kill all of them, the mad dogs! All of them! Don’t touch me! Don’t even come near me! I’ll get even with every last one of them, the swine, even if it means forced labour in Siberia for me. I’ll do it, I’ll do it, I tell you!’

She collapsed onto a chair and laid her head on the table. ‘Oh, my friends!’ she said quietly, her voice full of grief. ‘Dear girls, won’t they ever leave us in peace, to just be as we wish, free of their dirty wickedness?’ She sat there trembling. After a while she said, ‘It’s as if I’ve had a lovely dream . . . Thank you, Uncle Grisha, thank you, for this day, my darling. Thank you all.’

Lyuba began sobbing and coughing. Uncle Grisha stood next to her, shaking and fighting to hold back his tears. I put my hands on her shoulders. Even through her dress I could feel how hot they were. I knew that she needed to hear those most important words that one hears but once in a lifetime, words that can save your life. Yet I was incapable of saying them, of coming to her rescue. Perhaps I should have lied. Perhaps I would have if I had been certain it would have made things better for Lyuba. I had spoken those words already, long ago in Belorussia, when Lëlya, dying, her eyes full of tears, had gently pushed me away.

But Lyuba didn’t need to hear the words from me. She needed Uncle Grisha to say them, but he, a drunken, shaky, feeble old man who lived on charity, was unable. So, I said nothing. I took Lyuba’s hand and held it firmly. She looked at me through the tears clinging to her eyelashes and stroked my cheek. No matter how serious people may smirk, no matter what they may say about sentimentality, I have never forgotten that look of hers and I never will.

Loud voices rang out in the corridor, followed by hurried steps and the jangle of spurs. I stuck my head out to look. The whole corridor was full of frightened lodgers. A tall thin sergeant followed by several policemen entered the room. They politely removed their hats.

‘Please, come along, miss,’ the sergeant said firmly but with a note of pity.

Lyuba got up at once and walked out without looking at anyone. She didn’t even turn round.

They took the dirty, thick-set lodger away. The girls fell, crying, into each other’s arms, while Uncle Grisha grabbed a bottle of vodka with a violently shaking hand and drank down glass after glass as though it were water. At this point, the man on crutches, who had not said a word all evening, got up, shut the door, and said: ‘We’ll be called as witnesses. At the trial we must say that this man attacked Lyuba, that he cursed at her and beat her, and she hit him with the bottle in self-defence. And this old man’, here he pointed a crutch at Uncle Grisha, ‘has to be stone-cold sober. And he has to give the same testimony as the rest of us.’

Upon hearing this, Uncle Grisha rose. He stared the man straight in the eye and said with authority: ‘My dear sir! It’s not for you to give me instructions on how a gentleman is to treat a lady. I learned this at my mother’s knee. Although fate has seen fit to bring about my ruin, this does not give anyone the right to insult my honour. Be that as it may, I shall forgive you, but only because you acted out of chivalry.’

Uncle Grisha took the man’s hand and shook it firmly.

Something shifted in my consciousness that night. I no longer shunned all those things that had once disturbed me. I stopped treating people so casually – I now understood that I had an obligation to look for every spark of humanity in the people I encountered, no matter how different or unappealing they might seem. There is something in every human heart that responds, no matter how faintly, to that which is true and good.

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Not long after the incident with Lyuba I moved out of the Hotel Great Britain and into the draughtsmen’s office at the shell casing workshop in the factory. It was the draughtsman Grinko, the thin, consumptive-looking former SR, who had helped me make the move. He had visited me once at the hotel and was so disgusted by the smell that he talked me into moving even though I would not be staying in Yuzovka much longer. Grinko was the only one who worked in the office. I left the workshop late and slept on a wooden bench.

Life at the factory was so different from the suffocating life at the hotel that they might have been hundreds of versts apart. In the evening after work I went to the Bessemer shop. I could stand there for hours watching the molten steel pour from the gigantic tilting furnaces that looked like black pears three storeys high. I also went to watch the iron being poured from the open-hearth furnaces. It was a sinister sight. The molten iron ran into trenches in the ground amid clouds of blood-red steam. Everything around was either coal-black or burning red. The workers, lit by the hot liquid iron, looked like demons from hell.

Sometimes I walked over to the rail-rolling shop. Enormous rollers, screeching and shuddering, grabbed the white-hot pig-iron and bit down hard with their cold metal jaws, turning the short, fat billets into long, thin bars. Each bar went from roller to roller, being stretched and pressed thinner and thinner, until it finally emerged a deep-red length of rail. The finished rails skidded inches from your feet on metal rollers amid a heavy shower of sparks. The vast dark space roared and shook, screeched and rattled, thudded, clanked, smoked, sparked and hissed with steam. Through the din came long, loud cries of 'Watch out!' as workers raced past with steel carts carrying glowing pig-iron. If you didn't jump out of the way in time your clothes began to smoulder, while overhead, a crane swung with another mass of hot pig iron clutched in its claws like some massive crab.

Grinko left the office late. He was a bachelor and in no hurry to get home. After he had left, I lay down on the couch to read. I liked hearing the rumble from the factory. It calmed me to know that nearby hundreds of men were hard at work through the night. A portrait of Bessemer, the man who had invented this new way of making steel, hung on the wall. I dropped off to sleep to the shaking, whirring and humming of the factory and dreamed that I was travelling along on a fast-moving train.

Seated at his slanted draughting table with his long nose and floppy hair, Grinko looked like a caricature of Gogol. The similarity was highlighted by Grinko's black hat and cloak with lion-head clasps. Such cloaks had once been worn by naval officers. One day I told him about the hospital train. It was then that he told me how Sokolovsky had got him out of prison. I tried not to talk to Grinko about politics. I couldn't understand how a former revolutionary could be employed at an ordnance factory, and as a draughtsman no less. Grinko talked with a contemptuous smirk, bored by everything, except for those rare moments when a spark of malice flashed in his eyes.

I noticed that the workers laughed at him behind his back. They called him the 'retired carnival barker', clearly a sly dig at his former revolutionary activity. Once, while shining my electric torch into a shell casing, I found a note inside: 'Don't trust the draughtsman. Burn this note.' I did burn it, and from that moment I began to watch closely all the workers who delivered the casings, but their faces never gave anything away.

The day before I left Yuzovka I found a hectographed leaflet slipped into a casing. The words 'Workers of the World, Unite!' had been stamped in the top right corner. It was a Bolshevik proclamation, calling for the end of the imperialist war between nations and the start of a civil war between the classes. I read the proclamation and then stuck it back in the casing. When I returned to the workshop after lunch it was gone. The workers looked at me and smiled, but no one said a word.

The train for Taganrog left in the evening. I said goodbye to Grinko.

'You had no reason to distrust me,' he said, sitting sullenly at his table and not raising his eyes. 'Yes, I was once an SR, but now I'm an anarchist.'

After a moment he said in voice that suggested he doubted his own words:

'Anarchy is the only way of constructing a rational human society.'

'Well, all right then,' I said, 'God help you!'

'Either you're an opportunist or a cynic,' he said quietly though in a voice filled with anger. 'And I thought I was dealing with a fellow progressive.'

'As you can see from my identity papers I'm nothing more than a child of a petty-bourgeois family from the village of Vasilkov in the province of Kiev. So what do you expect? But anyway, I'm grateful to you for your hospitality and the last thing I want is to quarrel with you.'

'It's clear you'll go far,' he said rudely, no longer trying to hide his feelings.

'Well, not as far as you! I'll swear to that. Goodbye.'

I picked up my suitcase. Grinko sat there, still just as sullen. He snorted and watched me go with his beady eyes but didn't say a word. I left.

I waited for the night train to Taganrog in the gloomy buffet at the station in Yasinovataya. I couldn't help but think that another brief stage of my life had passed and brought me nothing but more grief. But strange as it may seem, this grief did not weaken but actually strengthened my faith that better days were coming, that the people's freedom lay ahead. It would come, I told myself. It couldn't fail to come, if only because so much enormous creative energy had been spent in expectation of its arrival.

[1] John Hughes (1814–89), a Welsh ironmaster, created the town of Yuzovka – Hughesovka – in the second half of the nineteenth century. London businessman and merchant Archibald Balfour lived in Russia and built himself a large estate in Yuzovka.

[2] Popular traditional Russian card game for up to six players using thirty-six cards of a standard fifty-two-card pack.

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Notebooks and Memory

Writers are often asked whether they keep notes or rely solely on memory. Most writers keep notebooks but rarely use them for their work. Their diaries and journals exist as a separate literary genre, and this is why they are sometimes published side by side with an author's novels and stories.

I remember old Shulgin, our Russian literature teacher back at the gymnasium, always telling us that 'culture is memory'. At first, we didn't really understand what Shulgin meant by that, but with time we realised that he was right.

'We hold entire centuries in our memory,' Shulgin liked to say. 'It's memory that preserves the history of the world, all our thoughts, ideas and visions, and it is the memory of all that has come before that stimulates the human mind to further creation. Had we no memory, we would live like blind moles.'

For a writer, memory is nearly everything. It not only stores gathered material, it also acts like a magical sieve, separating out and preserving what is most valuable. The dust and dross pass through and are carried away by the wind. What remains are small bits of gold, and it is from these, I believe, that works of art are made.

I have a reason for discussing notebooks. A few years ago I was shown the notebook of a dead writer. I started to read it and soon became convinced that these were not the usual short notes of random impressions one would expect to find, but a fairly consistent description of some seaside town. Let me try to reconstruct this description as accurately as possible.

As I read along, forgotten colours and smells and details of the place came back to me, but I couldn't place them. They appeared out of the mist or as fragments of an old dream that you try to piece together like a broken statue. What was it about these notes? Most of all it was the description of trees, especially the acacias:

> The trees' flowers are touched by a soft yellow and pink bloom and appear to be a bit dried out. The leaves cast feathered shadows on the white walls and stir from an undetectable breeze. The sight of these living shadows is enough to tell you that you are in the south and not far from the sea. When the flowers drop, the wind scoops them up and rolls them down the street where they crash, murmuring like the surf, against fences and the exteriors of the houses.

I also found in the notebook a description of a slope leading down to the port. The way down to the harbour and out to the ships and the open sea is not as easy to describe as might be supposed:

> Cobblestones leading down to the port polished to a leaden sheen by the hooves of carthorses. Spilled grains of oats and wheat sprout in the cracks between the stones. Steep breastworks overgrown with broom. It hangs over from above, like an arrested waterfall – a dense tangle of branches, leaves, thorns and yellow flowers. Deep recesses have been hacked out here and there in the dusty greenery. Each one is home to a little coffee house or shop. Here you can buy seltzer water or baklava, a flaky Greek pastry made with honey. All the coffee houses have glass fronts. You can look through to see card players in the faded striped vests worn by sailors gambling furiously. And there's more. Old women seated along low benches sell roasted chestnuts. The coals in the braziers throw off heat. There's a constant popping sound – bursting chestnut shells.
>
> A sharp turn – down below lies what looks like a toy port straight out of a children's picture book. Narrow piers overgrown with grass. It covers the railway tracks. A pity. Otherwise I'd be able to see the rusty red rails and the white heads of the daisies clinging to them.
>
> The barrels of the iron harbour guns, like drinking glasses, are filled with brackish water. If you bend over a gun, your heart beats faster – the water smells of the ocean and worm-wood, it's a smell that clears your head and reminds you of long sea voyages, the kind that heal your soul and quicken the mind.
>
> Small, greenish waves dance around the pilings. Seagulls screech and squawk greedily high overhead, having spotted a school of unsuspecting little fish.

The beating of the waves against the base of the signal beacon's hollow iron tower at the end of the pier makes a ringing sound. Mysterious signs – spheres and cones – hang from the harbour masts. What do these black spheres predict? Perhaps a storm. Or perhaps a dead calm. The transparency of the air infuses the seawater all the way to the bottom. No, it must mean a storm. The black sails of the fishing boats flap with alarm. Deck lights blink in the twilight.

The idea of a long sea voyage has already taken root in my mind, yet nevertheless it will be hard to leave this pleasant little town, where blue and green shutters rattle against the walls in the breeze and lighted interiors reveal rooms lined with shelves of big books – no doubt complete bound editions of *The Planted Field*, *Around the World*, *Our Motherland*.

Anyway, I can't leave because there are no steamships in the port. They're all lying far out in the roadstead. No steamships at all? There is, of course, a tugboat, snorting happily by the landing stage. And an old schooner, *Toiler of the Sea*, as well as two disarmed corvettes. They were towed in a long time ago to be broken up for scrap, but there they stand in the middle of the port, their heavy anchor chains reaching down into the water like outstretched arms. The corvettes dream of their past when they sailed through the Strait of Magellan and their bows sliced through the oily waters of the Aegean. If you look carefully you can make out through the dark their curved ram's-head bows, bowsprits and funnels.

By day you can take a little boat out to one of the corvettes, and if you give the watchman a packet of Gypsy Ada cigarettes he'll let you spend as long as you want reading on deck in the shade of the funnel. Read whatever you like, but such a spot is best suited to poetry or tales of travel, such as *The Frigate Pallada* or *The Journals of Captain Cook*. Or let the old sun-bleached deck and the smell of the seaweed clinging to the boat's iron sides along the waterline suggest something else.

From the decks of these corvettes, witnesses of past glories from the four corners of the globe, you get a good view of the sea. You see it doesn't sparkle with azure, turquoise, sapphire, aquamarine or any other jewels of the southern seas. The sea here is greenish and still. Its only ornament is the clouds, which the sea happily reflects.

The clouds slowly rise from the south and take on the appearance of medieval cities with their towers, cathedrals, basilicas, triumphal arches, glittering oriflammes and distant backdrop of snow-covered mountains – Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa.

Some eccentric artist has lit this town in a whimsical mood. The clouds shine, burning in the sunset with all the half-tones of the evening light, from blue to gold, from purple to silver.

I read this description with a nagging sense of familiarity. I kept looking for some name – of a street, a square, anything – that would tell me what town this was. Deep down I had a feeling I knew, but I wasn't certain.

And then, finally, there it was. 'Surprisingly, there is no mention of any of this – the sea, the port, the acacias, the black sails – in the books of one of our greatest writers who happened to be a native of this town.' These words held the key. Of course, this was Taganrog, Chekhov's birthplace. As soon as I realised this, everything I had read lost its aura of strangeness and became vividly real. Yes, this was Taganrog as I had seen it in 1916 when I arrived from Yuzovka and stayed on until late autumn. I saw it this way because I was young and a romantic. I lived on poetry and seafaring tales and I saw what I wanted to see. This is why I didn't want to return to Taganrog for a long time as an adult, for fear it would be a completely different town from the one that I remembered. But in the end, I did. And with age we tend to lose the life-saving faculty of exaggeration.

I ended up back in Taganrog in the autumn of 1952 purely by chance, and I saw that the first impression of my youth had been right. Taganrog was the same – it had not lost any of its charm even though the character of the town had changed. Now it was a city of students – of boys and girls with armfuls of books, happy loud voices in the streets, laughter, arguments and songs. And where, in 1916, modest suburbs had encircled the old town, nice little towns for the workers at the new factories had sprung up. But the old town of Taganrog was just as cosy, quiet and deserted as before. The fishing boats with their black sails left the shore and headed out to sea so smoothly that from up on the hill where the monument to Peter the Great stands you would think the wind was blowing black autumn leaves across the water.

In 1916, I took a room in the Kumbaruli Hotel. Large, empty and cool, it had been built back in the days of yore when Taganrog was the richest settlement on the Sea of Azov – the centre for traders from Greece and Italy. In those days Taganrog had hosted extravagant performances of Italian opera, welcomed Garibaldi and Shcherbina – the poet and lover of ancient Greece[1] – and witnessed the death of that bald dandy, Alexander I. It wasn't long, though, before Odessa and Mariupol surpassed its wealth,

and Taganrog emptied and fell silent.

The rooms at the Kumbaruli were so vast, the ceilings so high, that at night the lamps couldn't reach to the four corners. It felt as though one had ended up in a dark tunnel. The murky frescoes on the walls depicted classical landscapes with ruins, gentle waterfalls and languishing shepherdesses in red skirts. They were, of course, busy weaving garlands.

For the first two months I worked at the boiler works owned by Neuve, Wilde & Company, a Belgian concern. The factory stood outside town in the middle of the hot steppe. From the workshops you could hear the chirring of the grasshoppers.

When I arrived the factory was assembling the very first hydraulic press for the manufacture of shell casings. Belgian engineers in panama hats and brightly coloured braces hurried about in the light, empty workshops. They treated us Russian workers with arrogance and distrust, or at least we never saw them without a sour expression on their faces. The factory was experiencing a go-slow at the time. Almost nothing was getting done. It took a full two months just to assemble the base for the press.

Food had become scarce in town. Sometimes there wasn't even enough bread. Prices were rising, and we lived chiefly on seltzer water and salty hard tack, cases of which were somehow being surreptitiously obtained from the quartermaster's stores and shared among the workers in our shop.

I could no longer afford to stay in the hotel so I rented a room from a certain Abrasha Flaks, a loud, carefree broker. Abrasha Flaks was convinced that along with my work at the factory I was writing stories about Jack the Ripper and the famous American detectives Nick Carter and Nat Pinkerton in my spare time. This was the only type of literature Abrasha deigned to acknowledge. His messy flat was strewn with tattered dime-store thrillers printed on cheap, dull paper but with bright, colourful covers depicting the most shocking crimes together with the equally shocking exploits of the detectives.

I particularly remember one cover that showed Nat Pinkerton falling into the clutches of a Black murderer. The killer held Pinkerton by the waist out over the edge of a bottomless precipice, while Nat coolly pointed his two revolvers at him. The moral was obvious: if the killer released his grip, Nat would fall to his death, but not before he pumped two bullets into the man. Clearly, neither could kill the other without being killed. Abrasha Flaks adored the cover.

Abrasha had a small, whining wife with black ringlets, an irritated voice and scrutinising eyes. 'Don't let her size fool you,' Abrasha said to me in a confidential whisper. 'She's as mean as a feral cat. Better to go and drown yourself at sea than to live with such a woman.'

Abrasha never did drown himself, but he did look for distractions on the side. Once I ran into him on the pier with a mincing, ox-eyed girl. Red velvet poppies bobbed up and down on her hat while she coyly twirled a Japanese parasol decorated with pictures of dusky bathing beauties. Abrasha hired a boat and off they went for a ride. Once they had gone out a way from the pier the girl began to make suspicious giggles and squeals. The boatman, Lagunov, a severe, disapproving sort, said that Abrasha Flaks was a rogue and a skirt chaser and eventually he'd pay the price for it. Letting a man like that take a boat out was nothing but polluting the sea.

Every time Madame Flaks learned of his latest affair, the house exploded in a furious uproar. Madame Flaks would run into the yard in her dressing gown, fling her thin arms up to the heavens and begin screaming in a heart-rending voice: 'Listen to me, all good women, listen, listen to what I have to say! He's been at it again with that vile creature, that nasty Lyuska! May I never see my home again if I don't kill that viper, and poison myself with sulphuric acid. Hand her over, I say! Let me get my hands on her!'

After this Madame Flaks dashed into the street, apparently to the chemist's for some sulphuric acid or, perhaps, in search of Lyuska. Her compassionate neighbours ran after her, brought her home sobbing, and tried to calm her down: 'Don't get so upset, Madame Flaks, you'll give yourself a heart attack. Think of your nerves! No man is perfect.'

'Go and fetch my mama!' sobbed Madame Flaks. 'My dear old mama. She's at 5 Telegrafny Lane! And fetch my little sister Berta. And Aunt Sofochka. And my clever Borechka. Let them come and judge him as on Judgment Day! And be sure to go and fetch him too, that dog, or else I don't know just what I might do.'

She threw herself on the floor, rolling this way and that, thrashing and screaming. The women moaned and fussed about her and administered essence of valerian until finally, her 'dear old mama', a fat and threatening woman with a dark moustache, appeared.

'I need quiet!' she thundered in a bass voice before reaching the front door. 'What the devil's going on here? What's this circus? Dump a bucket of cold water on her!'

Madame Flaks calmed down in an instant and began twittering softly like an injured bird.

'I'm fed up dealing with this ridiculous fool!' roared dear old mama. 'Shut up, you lunatic! Take a good look at yourself ! Just as ridiculous as Khivrya herself.[2] Get up, wash your face, and may I never hear

another word out of you, you idiot!'

A couple of hours later the family trial was held in the yard under my window. Everyone came, including little sister Berta and clever Borechka. It was inexplicable and vile that this nasty family squabble had to be played out in front of others, in the courtyard, in the presence of all the curious and gossipy neighbours.

A round table covered with a crochet tablecloth and a few rickety bentwood chairs were dragged into the yard. Everyone took a seat at the table, all except Abrasha, that is, who sat a bit off to the side, a defeated look on his face, as though to signal his status as the accused. The trial did not begin right away. The rabbi still hadn't arrived. Meanwhile, the family waited in silence, staring reproachfully at Abrasha. He always appeared before the court in complete disarray – a wrinkled undershirt, no collar, his boots untied. Perhaps Abrasha was appealing for pity, or perhaps his appearance was intended to signal his repentance, a substitute of sorts for the ancient custom of sprinkling ashes over the head.

Eventually the good-natured old rabbi arrived, blew his nose loudly enough for the whole street to hear, took a seat in a heavy armchair and proceeded to leisurely stroke his beard with a checked handkerchief for a time until finally opening his mouth: 'So, you've been up to your same old tricks, eh?' And with that, the proceedings began. The trial was conducted in Yiddish, but this fact in no way lessened the interest of the large crowd of Russian onlookers who followed every twist and turn of the family drama.

Every trial ended in reconciliation. The rabbi was then invited in to dine with the family, and peace was restored to the household, for a time.

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There was little work for me at the factory. I would go home early and did a lot of reading and writing. I got a reader's card for the municipal library. A few special shelves held books donated to the library by Chekhov. You couldn't read the books yourself, but sometimes they showed them to visitors. The books were by half- forgotten authors – Potapenko, Shcheglov, Ertel, Izmailov, Barantsevich, Muyzhel[3] – with the authors' autographs or their inscriptions to Chekhov, all of them in a light, spidery hand, similar to doctors' prescriptions.

My life was so easy that I felt the need to establish some sort of order. I decided to write at home and then go and read in the harbour on one of the old corvettes, usually the *Zaporozhets*. I had become friendly with the watchman and he let me visit the corvette whenever I wanted. Sometimes, on warm nights, I even slept on the *Zaporozhets*. I would hire a boat from Lagunov, row myself out, tie up to the ship's iron ladder and climb to the top deck. I brought a bit of food with me, and together the watchman and I would prepare tea. It seemed to me that the combination of the sun and little food – which were constants then – made me stronger and healthier, and perhaps it really was so.

I read book after book of poetry that I borrowed from the library. Much of it I memorised. The music of poetry had captivated me. Only in verse could the full musical splendour of the Russian language reveal itself. In poems words sounded as if new, as if they had just been discovered and spoken for the first time. I was amazed by their precision, their expressive power, their lustre.

I could repeat endlessly my favourite lines, and every day I discovered new favourites. One stanza replaced another. I remembered now Lermontov's 'The silent steppe turns ever blue, embraced by the Caucasus in its crown of silver'; now Pushkin's words about how 'every hour carries away a bit of life', now Tyutchev's spring storm, which reminded me of how 'carefree Hebe, while feeding the eagle of Zeus, spilled her boiling cup of thunder and laughed with mirth as it rained down over the earth'; or Fet's spring – 'From the realm of ice, from the realm of snow, how fresh and clean, your month of May explodes'.[4]

I was surrounded by poets. I held conversations with them, my head swirled with their wealth of ideas and the richness of their images. Where did it all come from, I wondered? From what clear well-spring of the human soul? I felt I was the possessor of incredible riches. Leconte de Lisle, Heine, Verhaeren, Burns – not only did they speak to me, but they shared the very best that they had to say. Was this not happiness? I was surprised then, as I still am today, by those who fail to appreciate or recognise this joy.

I even became convinced that foreign poets sounded better in Russian translations than in their own languages. I particularly recall the poems of Heredia.[5] They matched perfectly the Azov shores with their rocky promontories, steppe and aura of antiquity, and they echoed the poetry of Lev Mei,[6] with his golden-haired Apollo, his seascapes and crimson sunsets. Reading the verse of Mei called to mind the lines of Alexander Blok, as spacious and fresh as the morning air:

> O spring without end, without limits –

An endless and limitless dream!
I recognise you, life! I embrace you!
And greet you with the clang of the shield![7]

Poetry was as real to me as bread, as my work at the factory, as the sun and the air. It forced me to live in a constant state of tension, in an unpredictable and infinitely varied world. It swept me along, just like a torrent carries away a branch broken from a tree. I couldn't resist it.

I perceived my surroundings through the lens of poetry. At first I thought that this lens imparted to my surroundings a new and different dimension, an exaggerated shine, that they did not truly possess. But that wasn't the case. And I have never regretted for a moment my youthful obsession with poetry. Because I know that poetry is life – life carried to its greatest power of expression. It is the world revealed in all its depths. It offers us the power to see things usually invisible to our indolent gaze.

In Taganrog, for the first time in my life, I was not living by the sea as a visitor. The impressions it made on me were no longer fleeting. They deepened and grew stronger. For this reason, I found myself particularly drawn to poems full of seaside life. I checked them against my own experiences.

I often took a rowing boat far out to sea – usually in the evening, after work. The sun was setting. I stopped rowing; water dripped from the oars. The sight of the sun going down called to mind the words 'The golden disc of the sun, leaving the azure wilderness, slowly submerges into the quiet embrace of the ripples . . .' I was struck by the accuracy of these words. The sun's golden disc really did descend from the desert of the sky and slowly disappear into the soft ripples of the sea. There was nothing grandiloquent or pompous about these words, but somehow they possessed a profound solemnity. Try as I might, I could never put my finger on that precise moment in the poem when this quality emerged and then went on to fill the rest of the lines.

I liked the little steamship offices in the port, the air dusky blue from tobacco smoke, the walls covered with timetables. Most of the people working in them were Greeks. I unconsciously applied to them the meaning of the lines 'My searching glance has so often been answered by the same glances of some Ulysses in the haze of the steamship offices, or some Agamemnon scoring billiards in a tavern'. I felt certain that I would find my Ulysses among these people. And I did. His name was Georgy Sirigos. A dried-up man with a leathery brown face and sad black eyes, a string of amber worry beads forever dangling in his lean hand, he worked as an agent for one of the steamship lines.

Whatever the weather, Sirigos rowed himself out in a small boat to the steamers anchored in the roadstead. He was considered the greatest living expert on the Sea of Azov. By the colour of the sky he could tell where the wind would be the following day or whether schools of herring would be running in the mouth of the Don. He could predict the direction of the wind within a degree, better than any wind gauge.

Sirigos had a beautiful daughter. She often came to her father's office and liked to sit on the windowsill absorbed in some book. If anyone spoke to her, she took a while to respond, raising her head slowly as though awakening from a dream. Her dark blue eyes never smiled, and her long black plaits smelled of lavender. She wore a sailor's pewter bracelet on her thin wrist. She never spoke to anyone. Sometimes I saw her down in the port. She would sit along the breakwater, dangling her legs. The splashing waves dotted her black dress with water. Like so many Greek women, she was fond of the colour black. A great many sailors wooed her, but she turned them all away.

I thought about Sirigos and his daughter for a long time. I don't know how many romantic adventures I dreamed up in which his daughter and I were the heroes of the story.

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About a mile out to sea from Taganrog stood a signal beacon on some low rocks. It was called the 'Sea Turtle'. I liked going out to the Sea Turtle in fine weather. I tied up to its metal railing and dropped my line in. I mostly caught black gobies. They wore focused expressions on their faces, as though they weren't upset at their misfortune, but were simply trying to figure out how it had happened. Clear water rippled among the rocks. Off in the distance I could see Taganrog sitting on the promontory, the cathedral domes, the lighthouse and the sloping rust-coloured shore.

One day while fishing at the Sea Turtle I lost track of time and suddenly realised it was almost dusk. I was sitting with my back to the open sea when I heard a softly approaching rumble. I turned. The wind had come up. A murky haze lay along the horizon, lit now and then by flashes of lightning. In an instant the water blackened, steel-grey ripples raced over the surface.

I untied the boat and started rowing back to shore. The wind strengthened so quickly that within minutes waves were splashing over the sides. As frequently happens on the Sea of Azov, the wind

changed direction and began blowing from Taganrog, driving me out to the open sea. A small, noisy waterspout went splashing by. The sun went down, and the Taganrog lighthouse blinked on. Depending on your distance from shore, the lighthouse's beam changed colour. I don't recall the exact sequence of these lights, but it seems to have gone from red when you were close in, then green a bit farther out, and finally white at the greatest distance from shore. I looked. The light was white. It was a long way back to the harbour.

The wind was raging. It blew in powerful gusts, first this way, then that, and whistled malevolently over the oars. The waves beat against the bow, the boat was lifted up in the darkness, and I could hear the sea hurling bucket after bucket of water into its bottom. The water was up to my ankles. I had to start baling. I dropped the oars and began feeling around for the scoop, but the waves spun the boat around. I lost my balance and then realised that the next big wave would flip it over.

I grabbed the oars and began rowing with all my strength. My wet shirt clung to me, making it that much harder to row. My hands were burning. I must have torn open some blisters. When I next looked up the light had turned to green. I was getting closer. 'Just a bit more,' I said to myself. 'A little more! It'll turn red any second and then you're safe.'

I lost all sense of time. It must have been around midnight. The heavy darkness roared and raged around me. I couldn't even see the foam on the waves as they crashed into the boat. I rowed and rowed, groaning from the strain. My wet hair covered my eyes, but I didn't bother to brush it away since there was nothing to see and if I stopped rowing even for a second the wind pushed the boat farther out.

I looked again and swore – the beam was back to white. I was being carried away, and it seemed there was nothing powerful enough to push my boat forward against such a raging wind. I dropped the oars and began baling. A strange indifference took hold of me. As I baled, I recalled for some inexplicable reason Mama and Galya, the side street in Lublin where I had picked a sprig of lilac for Lëlya, the lowering sky over the road to Baranovichi, a woman's warm palm gently stroking my cheek, the fire in the Kobrin synagogue. The memories came and went with no connection or logic, one after another. I felt for a while as though I couldn't hear or see anything.

When I lifted my head again the light shone faintly far away on the horizon like a drowning star.

I picked up the oars and, now numb, began to row slowly, evenly. I was surprised to still be alive. A wave struck me, and for a time I wasn't sure what had happened. After my head cleared, I looked up again. I saw a green light. Instead of feeling joy, I was seized by rage. I started to row so hard that the oars bent. I stood up and rowed, I leaned into the oars with my whole body. I was swearing and then began repeating the same ridiculous words over and over, unable to stop: 'To hell with you! I'm not giving up!'

Time passed, and I felt certain that the night would never end. And then there came a new ungodly roar from behind my back. Turning, I saw the red beam of the lighthouse. The port was close now. The roar was that of the surf crashing against the pier and then rolling back and slamming into the oncoming waves. Columns of frothy black water shot up into the sky. The greatest danger lay at the entrance to the port – what the sailors call the 'Devil's Cauldron'. The only way in was through a thick wall of churning, roiling water.

Lights were burning on either end of the breakwater. I turned my boat towards the space in between. My body tensed at the threat of danger. Watching the lights, I tried to gauge where the waves were taking me, and then rowed furiously in the other direction. I screamed at the top of my lungs to make it easier. The boat tossed like a cork in a whirlpool. It flew up one side of a wave, and crashed down the other, its bow buffeted in all directions, its bottom shuddering under the blows.

A clear, white light exploded overhead. There was no way I could have known it at the time, but I had been spotted from the breakwater and a flare had been shot off. I caught sight of the black walls of the breakwater above me and felt the violent surging of the water begin to subside. The lights on the ends of the breakwater slowly receded and all at once the boat floated along smoothly. I could make out up ahead the corvettes' familiar, tall bowsprits and the coiling reflection of lights over the water.

'Hey, you, in the boat! In the rowing boat!' someone shouted.

A lantern swung on the breakwater. I rowed over towards the light, found the stone steps and dropped the oars. A few of the port guards pulled me out of the boat and led me over to the guardhouse, where I saw myself in the blinding glare of an electric light – drenched to the bone, my clothes in tatters, my hands bloody and blue from the cold.

'God was watching over you,' said a white-haired port inspector with fierce eyebrows. 'Why did you go out to sea when the storm signals have been flying since two o'clock?'

'I can't read the signals,' I confessed.

'I see,' he said and then held out his silver cigarette case. 'Remember, everyone has to be able to read

storm signals. It's true not only at sea, but in life too. If you want to avoid disaster.'

[1] Nikolai Shcherbina (1821–69), Russian poet of Ukrainian and Greek parents, best known for his *Greek Verses* (1850).

[2] Khivrya is Cherevik's unfaithful wife in Gogol's short story 'The Fair at Sorochyntsi' from his *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1832).

[3] Ignaty Potapenko (1856–1929), a former friend of Chekhov's at whom, after their falling out, Chekhov poked fun with the figure of Trigorin in *The Seagull*; Ivan Leontiev (pen name Shcheglov) (1856–1911), author of short pieces of humour, stories on military life and several plays; Alexander Ertel (1855–1908), author of two large novels and a number of short stories; Alexander Izmailov (1779–1831), poet and publisher; Kazimir Barantsevich (1851–1927), prolific author of tales chiefly chronicling the lives of Russia's lower-middle classes; Viktor Muyzhel (1880–1924), short-story writer and novelist whose works focused mostly on Russian peasant life.

[4] Lines from Lermontov's 'In Memory of A. I. Odoevsky' (1839); Pushkin's 'It's Time, My Friend . . .' (1834); Fëdor Tyutchev's (1803–73) 'Spring Storm' (1828[?], completed early 1850s); Fet's 'Another May Night' (1857).

[5] José-Maria de Heredia (1842–1905), Cuban-born French poet.

[6] Lev Mei (1822–62), Russian poet and dramatist.

[7] First stanza of an untitled poem from Blok's cycle 'Invocation by Fire and Darkness' (1907).

68

The Art of Whitewashing

I was transferred from the Neuve, Wilde factory to the Vaksov oil mill. The summer of 1916 had come to an end.

The owner was a fat, incompetent young man believed by the people of Taganrog to be a millionaire. He always went about in a dirty, rumpled silk suit, scratching his patchy ginger beard with his five fingers and talking nonsense. Intent on demonstrating his patriotic fervour, Vaksov installed a hydraulic press at the oil mill and started manufacturing shell casings. Nothing, however, came of his big plan: Vaksov's press produced nothing but rejects. There was nothing for me to do at Vaksov's mill, so I sent a letter to my immediate superior, Captain Velyaminov in Yekaterinoslav, requesting that I be relieved of my duties. A week later I learned that my request had been granted.

I had been quick to leave my job at the mill because an old fisherman by the name of Mykola from Petrushin Spit, whom I had met at the Taganrog market, had agreed to take me on as his assistant. A fellow who said he was going to 'some hellish farm' farther up the road let me hitch a ride to Petrushin Spit on his oxcart. The wheels kept sinking up to the axles in the sandy dust. The man turned to me and said: 'Just look at this damned stuff ! Can't hardly move. But there's a way of dealing with it, you know. An old way, tried and true.'

'What's that?'

'You spray the roads with seawater. The salt binds the dust just like cement. Our womenfolk pour salty water on the mud floors back home in our huts and so they're as hard as stone. They do the same thing when threshing wheat to make the ground hard and flat. That's how it's done, sir! You've got to know what goes with what in this world or else you're likely to make all sorts of mistakes.'

He dropped me off at the bluff above Petrushin Spit and drove on, shouting lazily at the drowsy oxen: 'Get on, you devil's slaves! May the cholera strike you dead!'

I looked down from the bluff onto a long sandy spit dotted with a few dazzlingly white huts. Fine pink nets hung drying on poles along the shore. Small black wooden fishing boats, what they called *baidas*, rocked gently in the clear water. There was nothing else, save for the indigo sky, the sea, the sun and some yellow grass which swayed in the wind.

Walking down the steep slope I spied three bare-footed, tow-headed children – two very little boys and a girl about eight or so – running as fast as they could straight towards me. The girl was ahead and turned to yell to the boys: 'Faster! It'll be too late to hide! Faster!' Then all three of them disappeared as though they'd been swallowed up by the earth. But as I passed a tall clump of thistles, I heard a soft whimpering and a hurried whisper: 'Stop crying! He'll hear you. I'll pull the splinter out for you.'

The children had hidden in the thistles. Once I had passed, they came out and followed me, though at a cautious distance. One of the boys was limping; he must have stepped on a thorn. I stopped and called out to the children. They approached, slowly, shyly, avoiding me with their eyes, and sniffling. The two boys tried to hide behind the girl.

'Hello,' I said to her. 'Can you tell me where Grandpa Mykola lives?'

She started, looked up at me with a pair of shining blue-grey eyes, and smiled. That smile, just like her entire small, suntanned being, radiated friendliness, awkwardness and pride – pride that this mysterious stranger from the city had asked her and not the boys.

'Come on, Uncle!' she said boldly, taking me by the hand and leading me, happy and flushed, to the last of the tiny huts right on the water's edge. Women of all ages suddenly appeared, as if by an invisible command, at their doorways. They hastily straightened the kerchiefs on their heads, greeted me warmly and teased the girl: 'Natalka, where'd you find yourself such a handsome fellow? Aren't you a clever little thing! We were all wondering who's that she's got with her – could it be the captain of the *Kerch*?'

The *Kerch* was the small paddle steamer that travelled between Rostov and Mariupol. Sometimes it stopped at the fishing villages on the various spits along the way to deliver supplies. Apparently, the children thought that the boat was something out of a fairytale.

Natalka walked proudly on, ignoring the women's teasing comments. Her flushed cheeks, however, gave away her joy. The two boys, conscious of their insignificance, trudged along behind us in a deep,

reverential silence. And so we walked to the hut of Grandpa Mykola, where Natalka delivered me into the hands of a skinny old woman with shrewd eyes – Grandma Yavdokha, Mykola's wife.

These were the good omens that greeted me and my new life on Petrushin Spit.

Grandpa Mykola had been glad to hire me. All the young fishermen had been conscripted into the army and sent off to war, and so, in his words, 'there was fabulously no one left to do the work'. Grandpa Mykola used the word 'fabulously' to mean all sorts of things. It could mean 'completely' or 'undoubtedly' or 'many' and even just 'yes'. His answer to any sort of question was often 'Fabulously!'

He took me on for 'grub without pay'. In other words, Grandpa Mykola was obliged to feed me, and in return I declined any money from the sale of our catch. I ate so little that the deal proved to be a good one for Grandpa Mykola, so good in fact that he and Grandma Yavdokha couldn't help discussing it between the two of them. They found my agreeing to these terms something of a mystery and became convinced that I must be a bit touched and something of a 'holy fool'.

I began my education in 'the science of fishing'. It truly was a sort of science, a complicated craft that demanded 'fabulously' great experience and a special knowledge handed down from generation to generation of fishermen that was not to be found in any book. Grandpa Mykola initiated me into this science slowly, little by little, both by showing me how it was done and by sharing stories from his past. Gradually I learned the various kinds of fish in the Sea of Azov and their habits as well as the main routes by which they travelled. I learned how to read the sea's weather patterns and its winds (of which there were many) – 'Tramontane', 'Bora', 'Mountain', 'Delta', 'Chaser', 'Lower', 'Upper', 'Kerch', 'Levant' and still others, more rare.

Every fisherman had his own 'place' on the sea where he set down his nets. Everyone was careful to respect these boundaries. The first thing Grandpa Mykola taught me was how to orient myself on the water by taking my bearings from landmarks on shore.

'Look right there,' he would say. 'When that dead tree on the slope hides the cross on Taganrog Cathedral from view, that's our line. We need to stick to it and move fabulously straight along just like on a string until the nearer of those two burial mounds hides the one a bit farther on. Where the two lines meet is our place and we can stop and let down our nets.'

In calm weather it was easy to hold to the line, but when the wind was blowing I fought with the oars for a long time until I learned how to manoeuvre the awkward *baida* to the correct spot. We let down our nets every evening and pulled them up every dawn, regardless of the weather. Only in the worst of storms did the fishermen stay at home. They never admitted that it was too dangerous to go to sea, saying instead that the rough waters had 'upset' all the fish and so there was no point in checking the nets.

I saw many dawns at sea. Some were warm and gentle. The morning's glow was born in the stillness of the night. A soft blue began to appear in the eastern sky, the stars faded – not all at once, but slowly, as if they were moving farther and farther away, growing paler and shrinking into the depth of the sky – and a light fog drifted over the crystal-clear water. By the time we had reached the nets the sun was up. Our *baida* cast a shadow, turning the water a deep malachite green. It was so still that the clunk of an oar against the side of the boat could be heard far out at sea and as clearly as across a room. The fishermen called mornings like this 'angel dawns'. But some dawns were chilly, grey and raw. The wind whipped reddish-brown waves, and a dirty white haze swirled along the horizon. Some dawns were black and stormy with torn skies; some were a dull green and spat spray in your face. A red dawn with a fevered sky and a cutting wind always meant a storm, but these were rare – it was August, the calmest, warmest month on the Sea of Azov.

Grandpa Mykola sold his fish directly to dealers – loud, sharp-tongued women – or sometimes on a Sunday he took it himself to the market in Taganrog. He was a quiet, almost sullen-looking old man, unlike the other fishermen on the spit. Yavdokha was an ailing, gentle sort who sighed and held her tongue in his presence but loved to complain of his miserliness behind his back.

It was a custom on the spit to whitewash all the huts on the same day. They did this often – before every holiday and after every rain. The women got together early in the morning and whitewashed one hut after another, beginning with Grandpa Mykola's, the last hut on the spit. These were cheerful occasions. The women – their skirts hitched up over their sturdy, suntanned legs, their faces flushed, their white teeth flashing – yelled back and forth, joked, laughed, jingled their necklaces and gave suggestive looks at the menfolk from under their long eyelashes. 'Sorcery', Grandma Yavdokha called it, 'bewitchment'.

The best whitewasher was Natalka's mother, Khristina – a thin, friendly woman with a bright coral necklace dangling from her brown neck. Her husband was away in the army, so she and Natalka fished together on their own small *baida*. Using nothing more than a crude piece of tree bark, Khristina painted

clean, neat borders of blue and green around the windows. I remembered what the oxcart driver had told me about salt and recommended to the women that they add a bit to the lime in their whitewash to keep it from smearing and make it last longer. They did and were pleased. To show her gratitude, Khristina painted beautiful big blue roses and cockerels on the stove in Grandpa Mykola's hut.

On Sundays I took Natalka and the two boys out with me in a *baida*. We dropped anchor close to shore and fished for gobies. We always spoke in whispers. Natalka never stopped whispering about whatever passed through her head – all manner of news and gossip, like the story of an old woman with eyes of iron who roamed along the high road through the steppe and whoever she looked at was certain to immediately lose a relation or close friend at the front. Or how every night the thistles on the burial mound burned with a red flame ('I haven't actually seen it myself, but that's what they say') and some sailor from Mariupol had bet three roubles that he would go and light his cigarette from this flame.

'Well, did he?' the frightened boys asked.

'Of course he did!' Natalka answered nonchalantly. 'And he didn't even die. A sailor can do anything. Oh, and I saw lightning over the water all last night, but it wasn't really lightning, it was the souls of dead soldiers killed at the front. They're trying to make contact with us. They want to talk to us. Mama says that someday it could be Papa's soul crackling over the water like that. Then she starts crying. I try to calm her down and always tell her that no bullet will ever take Papa away because I buried my little iron cross under the stone woman out in the steppe, and then hopped around it on one leg three times, saying: "Blessed St Nicholas of Myra, patron of all sailors, don't let my Papa die."

'I suppose you think I'm lying,' said Natalka anxiously. 'But I'm not! God punish me if I say anything that's not true.' She crossed herself and then crossed her fingers as proof. The boys looked at her with terror in their eyes and furtively crossed their fingers as well.

One day in October Mykola brought me three letters from the post office in Taganrog – one from Mama, one from Romanin and a third in a clumsy, unfamiliar hand. For a long time I couldn't bring myself to open them. Like the time in Odessa when I had wanted to join the hospital steamer *Portugal*, I felt as though I were a traitor. I had chosen an easy life for myself while the war still dragged on and there was the sense of a vague storm just over the horizon.

'Of course,' I told myself, 'the simplest thing for me to do is stay here on the spit, to fish, enjoy the warm sun, build up my strength and read good books, as though there was no war on and all was right with the world. It's no good telling myself that they wouldn't let me return to the front or that I need to go out and collect all sorts of experiences in preparation for that "great future" of mine as a writer.'

For some reason I thought of the words of Polonsky: 'A writer, being nothing but a wave on the sea that is Russia, cannot help but be carried along by the elements.'[1] Polonsky had been right, of course. If I truly wanted to be a writer, then I needed to be in the thick of things and not hide away in the quiet of the steppes and soothe myself with the music of poetry, no matter how beautiful.

I decided to return to Moscow even before I had read the letters. I walked down to the shore where the *baida* lay half out of the water, climbed into the stern, opened the letters and began to read. Romanin wrote that our unit had moved to Molodechno near Minsk. There was little work at the moment, but he had no plans to leave because he foresaw significant events happening soon (these words he had underlined) and he had some other reasons of his own for staying in the army.

'As for you,' Romanin wrote, 'I think they'd take you back in the unit now. See what can be done in Moscow and get back here. Gronsky has recovered and is with us again. He's settled down and is very reserved. Kedrin is working in the administration in Minsk. Still making a fool of himself, as always. How are you, and where are you? Lord knows what you've got up to!'

Mama wrote that she and Galya were delighted with Kopan. The house and farm were keeping them very busy. She noted that it would be nice if I were to come and visit.

The third letter was from Lyuba in Kharkov.

> I'm writing c/o general delivery in Taganrog on the off chance you might receive this letter. Faina Abramovna told me you were in Taganrog. Your deposition was read at the trial. Thank you, my dearest. I was acquitted and sentenced to just a month's penance in a convent. Can you imagine that? Me, a nun? Uncle Grisha died of delirium tremens. The poor man. I'm so sorry he's gone and can barely stand it. They buried him without me.
>
> I'm in Kharkov now, selling tickets in a cinema. If I knew for certain where you were, I'd come and see you for a day, if only to talk – I feel so alone and there's no one here I can talk to. I haven't forgotten what you did and never will. Write should you have plans to pass through Kharkov. I'll come to see you at the station, day or night.
>
> Love and kisses. Your Lyuba.

I decided to wait for the *Kerch* to take me to Mariupol and make my way from there by train to Moscow. I was putting off leaving because I was certain I would never see this blessed place again. Besides, the final days of October had been so calm and warm that I couldn't tear myself away. It was a shame to forgo even a minute of this magnificent autumn. The beautiful, clear days broke slowly through the morning mist. Burning it away, a dazzling yet faintly chilly light shone all day long until the sun went down. The sea was dead calm, and every little sound carried far across the water. Unlike summer, the autumn was filled with a lingering resonance. Dead leaves crunching underfoot, a steamship's distant whistle, women's voices in the yards – nothing died away at once, rather an obscure vibration lingered in the air, like the slow tolling echo of a bell. It was as though the autumn air were a vast sensitised medium trying to preserve the sounds of each hour and moment – as though the autumn itself, sorry to have to leave these places and people, were listening and committing them to memory.

In the end, two events finally made up my mind to leave. The first happened in Taganrog. One day the fisherwomen returning from the market told us that there had been a disturbance in town. A crowd of hungry women and children had raided the bakeries and food shops and the Cossacks had refused to fire on them.

The second seemed insignificant by comparison. I was mending Grandpa Mykola's nets when a lanky fisherman by the name of Ivan Yegorovich came over and sat down beside me. We each lit a cigarette and then he said: 'For a long time now I've been meaning to talk to you about something that's been on the minds of all of us here on the spit, but I've just not been able to bring myself to do it. You're an educated man, so perhaps you look at things differently than we fishermen do. If so, I hope you'll forgive me.'

'What's all this about?' I asked.

'Well, it just doesn't seem right. All our young men are off in the army, and their wives and kids are back here on their own, and the womenfolk are thrashing about like a fish on dry land trying to get by and keep everybody fed. They're out there fishing by themselves, and sometimes it's just too much for them. And then here you are, a strong young man, working for Grandpa Mykola. You ought to go help one of the women, maybe Khristina in her *baida*. Now that seems fair. Folks here find the whole situation a bit strange. Grandpa Mykola is just using you so he can stuff a few extra roubles in his money box.'

I felt myself blushing. Ivan Yegorovich was right. Why hadn't I thought of that? I told him that these things had never occurred to me, and now I was getting ready to leave so there was nothing I could do.

'Well, why don't you rethink that and stay here on the spit? Folks here would like that.'

'No, I can't.'

'Well, then, I'm sorry I've bothered you,' said Ivan Yegorovich. He rose. 'It's your business. You need to do what's best. Good health to you.'

After this conversation I had no more desire to help Mykola and Yavdokha. I decided to leave the very next day for Taganrog, but to my surprise the *Kerch* arrived that same evening. It was sailing for Mariupol.

Everyone on the spit came to see me off. They wished me well and much success and gave me a parting kiss, but only after first carefully wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. Khristina, together with Natalka and the two boys, rowed me out to the *Kerch*. I said nothing to Khristina about my conversation with Ivan Yegorovich. I was too ashamed of my stupidity. I climbed up onto the deck, covered with hay bales, and found a place along the railing. The siren let out a ferocious bellow, quite out of keeping with the steamer's shabby appearance and inconsiderable size. The paddle wheels set in motion, churning the water to a frothy green. Natalka was standing in the *baida*. She was frowning and then covered her face with her sleeve. I could see that she was crying. Khristina bent over her, ruffled her hair and laughed.

The *baida* began to move away, along with the shore, where the women stood waving white kerchiefs – it looked as though a flock of seagulls were weaving round and round low over one small spot of sand, unable to decide whether or not to land. Natalka, too, her face stained with tears, stood there waving a faded green shawl. The steamer carried me away from the steep shore. Once again, as with every big change in my life, my heart felt heavy. Making it worse was the sense that my life had no continuity. It seemed to be nothing but a series of disconnected fragments. People suddenly appeared in my life, and then they disappeared from it just as suddenly, perhaps forever.

From Mariupol I sent a telegram to Lyuba in Kharkov. I regretted it immediately, but by then it was too late.

The train arrived in Kharkov early one chilly morning. Lyuba was waiting for me on the platform. She was wearing a short jacket and a light shawl over her head. She was so cold her lips had turned blue. She raced towards me. We kissed. Then she looked carefully into my eyes, took me by the hand, and without

saying a word we went and stood behind a boarded-up kiosk on the platform.

'Don't say anything,' Lyuba said.

She put her arms around my shoulders and laid her head against my chest, as though seeking protection. I was silent. She held me tighter. Her head was trembling. We stood like this for several minutes. The third whistle blew. Lyuba looked up, quickly made the sign of the cross over me, turned and then walked off down the platform, the edge of her shawl pressed to her face. I got back into my carriage. The train moved off.

[1] A line from 'For the Album of K. Sh. . . .' (1865) by the late Romantic poet Yakov Polonsky (1819–98).

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A Raw February

In Moscow I went straight from the station to the headquarters of the Union of Cities. The first person I ran into there was Kedrin. We were so pleased to see each other after so long that we kissed. Kedrin had been sent to Moscow from Minsk on business. I told him I wanted to rejoin the unit.

'That's a tricky matter,' he said. 'Let me see what I can find out.'

He left to see what he could do and was gone a long time. When he finally came back, he told me with an air of mystery that at present nothing could be done to help. Morale in the army was quite unsettled, it was a tense time, and it would be better to avoid any trouble at the front. That was the opinion of the union's leadership. I was deeply upset. Kedrin removed his glasses, cleaned them, and then put them back on and looked at me closely.

'Don't get down,' he said at last. 'We'll find you some work. Romanin showed me that piece of yours, "Blue Overcoats". You can write.'

He wrote a letter recommending me to an acquaintance of his who worked in the editorial office of a Moscow newspaper. I went immediately and was met in a dusty room by a bald man with the face of an old actor. He was sitting behind a desk buried under galleys. Seated across from him in a heavy armchair was a fat little man with the silver moustache of a Zaporozhian Cossack dressed in a grey long-waisted coat and a lambskin hat. There was a wily twinkle in his eyes. He could have been Taras Bulba himself.[1]

The bald man read Kedrin's letter and said: 'So, I see there's still some life in that old dog yet! Just a moment.' With that he shoved Kedrin's letter under a pile of galleys and went on with his writing.

Taras Bulba pulled a silver snuff box out of his coat pocket, tapped it with a finger, opened it and then, with a quick conspiratorial wink, offered it to me. 'Please, have some! General Skobelev himself presented it to me after Plevna.'

I said no, thank you. Taras Bulba deftly sprinkled some snuff onto his thumbnail, snorted it up his nose and let out a deafening sneeze. There was a smell of dried cherries. The bald man didn't pay Taras Bulba the slightest attention. Taras Bulba nodded in the direction of Baldy as he gave me another wink, picked up a horseshoe being used as a paperweight on some galleys, and then proceeded to bend it straight. At this, Baldy looked up. 'That's an old trick!' he said. 'That won't get me to change my mind. There's a war on – no advances!'

'You've got a visitor,' said Taras Bulba, pointing to me. 'All I was trying to do was remind you of that fact. Nothing more.'

'Well, all right then,' he said reluctantly and gave me a look. 'Let's see. Tell us, who are you then? Oh, by the way, I'm Mikhail Alexandrovich, and this', here he pointed to Taras Bulba, 'is the king of Moscow reporters – the poet, former wrestler, actor, connoisseur of local slums and bosom-friend of Chekhov and Kuprin,[2] the famous 'Uncle Gilyai', the one and only Vladimir Alexeevich Gilyarovsky.'[3]

I didn't know what to say.

'Ignore him. I don't bite!' said Gilyarovsky, noticing my unease. He shook my hand so hard he nearly crushed my knuckles. He got up and started towards the door but stopped, nodded at me and said: 'I believe in him.' With that Gilyarovsky walked out, humming a tune.

Baldy hired me, told me how fortunate I was, and said: 'These are perilous times, fraught with uncertainties. It appears we're about to witness Russia's second "Time of Troubles".[4] Things appear calm on the surface, but underneath the country's boiling, and the tighter the government tries to screw down the lid, the bigger will be the explosion. We need to keep an eye on this simmering pot. We need to know what Moscow is thinking and talking about. What are people saying in the theatres, at home, at the markets and in the factories, in the *banyas* and on the trams? What are the workers saying, the cabbies, cobblers, milkmaids, actors, merchants, engineers, students, professors, soldiers and writers? That's going to be your job. For now, and then we'll see.'

That same day I took a small room in Granatny Lane, the very street where I had been born twenty-three years earlier.

I noticed that Russians spoke most freely in trains and taverns. So, I began my work on the loud, smoke-filled suburban lines that extended up to sixty versts from Moscow. I would buy a return ticket

and ride to the end of the line and back. I managed to visit a good many towns around Moscow and quickly became convinced that the city was surrounded by an ancient, moss-covered Russia about which few of even the oldest Muscovites had any idea.

The backwoods started just fifty versts from the city – brigand-infested forests, impassable roads, tumbledown settlements, rotting old churches besieged by holy fools, starving horses covered in their own excrement, brawling drunks, graveyards with broken crosses, peasants living alongside their sheep, snotty children, savage monasteries, rubbish-strewn markets shrill with squealing pigs and vile cursing – nothing but decay, poverty and thieving wherever you looked.

And throughout the whole of this land, where the wind whistled in the bare branches of the birch trees, you could hear the harsh, stifled weeping of women. Soldiers' mothers, wives, sisters and brides. They wept quietly, hopelessly, as though no one and nothing could ease their grief.

So did this land lie waiting for winter – palisades of young firs black against the crimson of the dying autumn sunsets, the crackly first ice, as fine as sugar, the smoke of frozen villages drifting over the fields. Never before had Blok's lines seemed so prophetic:

> My Russia, my life, are we to languish together?
> Yoked to the Tsar and Siberia, to Yermak and prison . . .

I listened to endless conversations – drunk and sober, meek and desperate, resigned and angry – and the one thing they had in common was the hope for peace so that the soldiers could come home from the war and life would become less of a struggle, for without this there was nothing left to do except to die a hungry death. It seemed as if all the people's anger had been gathered out there, to the west, in the army. The village was waiting for this anger to roll back like the tide, smashing their hateful old way of life and sweeping away their wretched existence, so that the peasant and the craftsman, the factory hand and the worker could finally have power over the land. Then life would truly begin. Then every hand would itch for work, and such a ringing of saws, axes and hammers would erupt across the country that not even the clanging of every single bell could drown it out.

Humans are curious creatures. I saw in these places around Moscow a reflection of the misfortune that had befallen all Russia, but one thing filled me with a secret joy – my discovery of the astonishingly vivid and direct language of the people. Turgenev's words that such a language could only be given to a mighty people no longer sounded like an exaggeration, but a simple truth.[5]

Things were different in Moscow. Some people vainly argued about how to solve the crisis, others knew how and prepared for it in silence, and still others simply got rich. Rapacious profiteers operated on a massive scale. The most prominent of them was perhaps the Siberian industrialist Vtorov, a sort of Lopakhin from Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, magnified a thousand-fold.[6]

Over this enormous swirling hive of anxiety lay the shadow of Rasputin. Never before in all Russian history had an illiterate swindler, horse-thief and kulak come to St Petersburg in search of easy profit and become overnight practically the autocrat of the country, the ruler of its fate, the right hand of the tsar, and the possessor of his own harem of court beauties. Imperial Petersburg – the haughty Petersburg of aristocrats, cabinet ministers, courtiers and generals – lay down at his feet like some beaten dog hoping for a scrap from his master's table. The country had never known such humiliation and shame. Fateful times were upon us. Weary of the suspense, everyone awaited the dénouement.

It came at last. It began with Rasputin's murder. They tossed his body into a hole in the ice of the Malaya Nevka River. Tough as the proverbial horse-thief, Rasputin had been poisoned, shot and drowned. According to the doctors, his heart had kept on beating for a few minutes even after he went down into the icy water.

In Moscow, everything was happening at once. Thousands of Uzbeks in green robes were marched under armed guard through the streets. An uprising in central Asia had been crushed, and the Uzbeks were being forcibly driven to Murmansk to die after completing the construction of the Arctic railway. Their silver- embroidered black skullcaps were dusted with the first dry snow of the year. The procession lasted for several days.

Refugees from Poland, the Baltic territories and Belorussia poured into Moscow. Their quick, sibilant accents could be heard more and more amid the sing-song speech of the locals. Old Jews with the appearance of rabbis walked the streets of Moscow, sheltering from the snow under their umbrellas. Symbolist poets, having lost all connection to reality, sang of the pale ghosts of passion and the fires of otherworldly lusts. Amid the general confusion of ideas and sentiments, no one paid them any attention. People didn't have any time for them by now.

Work back at the newspaper never slowed down, and we were busy day and night. We spent every free minute in the editorial office, arguing, shouting and waiting for what was to come next. Worrisome

rumours arrived from Petrograd. Visitors described grumbling bread queues, brief, angry demonstrations in the streets and squares, and unrest in the factories.

Not long after Rasputin's murder, Baldy called for me. 'Here's the thing,' he said. 'I like your pieces. You have a way of capturing something . . . something of the popular mood. So, I've come up with the idea of sending you out to some God-forsaken province and you can report back on what's on the minds of people out in Turgenev's Russia.'

I agreed, and together we discussed where I might go to find the most out-of-the-way place that wasn't too far from Moscow. The well-known theatre critic and Chekhov specialist Yury Sobolev, the gentlest of men whom everyone called simply Yurochka, both to his face and behind his back, sat in on our discussions.

'Chekhov wrote that for him the little village of Yefremov in Tula province best personified Russia's backwater,' said Yurochka. 'It's not far from Yelets. By the way, it's Turgenev country too. Yefremov is on the Krasivaya Mecha River. Remember 'Kasyan from Krasivaya Mecha'?[7] That's where you should go.'

I arrived in Yefremov at night and sat until dawn in the station's cold buffet. It was painted a dirty mauve and served nothing but lukewarm tea. The paraffin lamps smoked. A bearded policeman with jangling spurs patrolled the station. He gave me a suspicious look every time he passed by. As soon as it was light, I took a droshky to the town's only hotel. In the drab light of a winter morning, the town looked startlingly small and shabby. The brick prison house, the distillery with its tall, thin iron chimney, the scowling church, the rows of identical little houses (stone on the bottom, timber on top), and the weary glow of the street lamps produced a depressing effect. The only structure of possible interest was a row of market stalls which had been adorned with a few columns and archways that spoke vaguely of the past. Jackdaws circled in the dank air. The streets stank of fresh horse manure.

'So that's it?' I said to the driver. 'Not much to look at.'

'And why should you look at it?' he said indifferently. 'No one comes here to have a look around. This ain't Moscow.'

'So, what do they come for?'

'For grain and apples. We used to have the richest grain ex changes around. The merchants had a turnover of hundreds of thousands. Our apples are still among the best. Antonovkas, they're called. If you're interested, you should go to the village of Bogovo, not far from here. I can take you myself. Even in winter they've got all the apples you could want.'

The hotel was dark and quiet. My room was dark too, even though it faced the street, but at least it was warm. The sour smell of cabbage soup and samovar smoke wafted up from the restaurant. The pock-marked boy from the front desk wouldn't leave my room and stood there staring at me, his mouth hanging open, as though in amazement. No doubt he was having trouble figuring out what on earth had brought me to Yefremov. I showed him to the door. He took no offence and stopped on the way out to say: 'You needn't think . . . Why, we had a colonel staying with us the other day. And now there's a fortune teller from Moscow. Madame Troma! Skinny as a cat. Smokes three packets of Ira cigarettes a day. Rings on every finger – diamonds, all of them. We have something going on here all the time. There'll be dancing downstairs tonight. The owner's always arranging things. It brings in some extra money. He's quite a man!'

Finally, he left. I hadn't slept since leaving Moscow and so was glad to get undressed and into bed. It had been some time since I had felt so tired. I was still shivering from the cold and didn't care to move or speak. The last thing I need is to get ill in this awful hole, I thought to myself. The idea of being ill reminded me of what I was always trying to forget – my loneliness. Mama and Galya far away. Romanin off at the front. Lëlya dead. There was no one I could turn to for help if I were ill or in trouble. No one! Hundreds of people had walked in and out of my life, but none of them had stayed. It was painful and unjust. Or at least that's what I thought.

I fell asleep. I dreamed of a row of telegraph poles stretching out across a snowy plain. I awoke, but as soon as I fell back to sleep the dream returned – the same unbroken plain and the same telegraph poles, one after another stretching off into the unknown for some mysterious reason. This happened several times. In my dream I knew perfectly well that they were leading nowhere, that there were no cities or villages up ahead, only more snow and the dreary emptiness of the winter cold.

I was awakened for good by a feeling that someone was nudging my bed. I opened my eyes and, my mind still full of cobwebs, heard what sounded like the rollicking brass clang of a fire-brigade band. The windows were rattling. A big bass drum banged away with cheerful persistence. The dance had begun. I got dressed and went downstairs. This was an excellent opportunity to have my first look at the Yefremovites.

In a poorly lit room with a low ceiling, beads of condensation dripped from the walls. A band

thundered away. Girls with tense expressions sat on squeaky chairs and fanned themselves with their kerchiefs. In the middle of the empty floor a haggard man in a worn coat was performing a Russian dance. His long, melon-shaped head was covered with bristly grey hair. He was clearly drunk, but danced with skill and flair, leaping, kicking and shouting: 'Ekh, Nyurka, come stop your scoldin', you know it's you I want to be holdin'!' The doorways were crowded with men, all of them rather old, except for a few sickly youths with long necks and watery eyes. Clearly, they were 'white-chit boys', unfit for military service.

Sitting nonchalantly, one leg crossed over the other, in a prominent spot in the room, next to a bony woman who looked as though black bugles had been glued all over her body (I guessed this must be the fortune teller), was a snub-nosed man with a reddish imperial and long hair that fell to the collar of his checked raglan coat. He wore a wide-brimmed black hat and held on his lap a walking stick with a silver knob in the shape of a naked mermaid splayed out on a cresting wave. A bored smile on his face, the man twirled the cane as he surveyed the room through his small pince-nez. Upon seeing me, he got up and, careful to avoid the dancer, crossed the room.

'A thousand apologies!' he said, removing his hat with a theatrical flourish. 'I see from the hotel register that you are a writer, a rare bird in these parts. And so, please permit me, being myself what I like to call a "confrère of the quill", to introduce myself – I am Princess Daydream.'

I was dumbfounded. He smiled smugly.

'You never thought you would run into me in the back of beyond, did you? My dear mother lives here. I often come to visit her from Moscow. I find it to be a balm for body and soul.'

Princess Daydream! Of course. I had often run across the signature in cheap women's magazines at end of the 'Answers to Our Lady Readers' Questions' section. With expert knowledge and a rather perfumed sentimentality, Princess Daydream gave advice on the trickiest and most intimate questions: How do you win the love of a blond stranger? What do you do with an unfaithful husband? What is platonic love? How do you cure yourself of blackheads and chlorosis?

'My real name', he said, 'is Miguel Rachinsky. Allow me to introduce you to another guest to our town, the famous fortune teller Madame Adelaide Tarasovna Troma.' He introduced me to the bony woman. She held out a claw sparkling with paste diamonds, looked me over insouciantly, and said in a raspy voice: 'Oh, such a fortunate young man! Oh, a marvellous future awaits you. You were born under a lucky star.'

She was about to say something more, but started coughing uncontrollably, pressing a black lace handkerchief to her mouth. Her whole body shook, and she doubled over. Through her low neckline I caught sight of her sharp collarbone and emaciated breasts. Madame Troma could not stop coughing and had to leave the room.

Miguel Rachinsky invited me for a bottle of wine in the restaurant. As we drank, he told me all there was to know about Yefremov. He began by telling me that the drunk man was the local undertaker, a gifted dancer hired by the proprietor 'to entertain' the guests and help get them out onto the dance floor. Otherwise, the girls would just sit there like bumps on a log all evening, waving their kerchiefs and blushing. The men would just lurk in the doorways and then leave for home, confused as to what the whole point of the exercise had been, while a few of them would head to the buffet to drink and brawl until morning.

According to him, the town lacked any sort of 'cultural intelligentsia', except for Rachinsky himself and two others: Osipenko, a young man who taught Russian literature at the girls' school, and Bunin, an official in the excise department and a brother of the famous writer. But Bunin was unsociable; his only interest was sorcery – anything to do with charms, incantations and spells.

After that first meeting, I saw Rachinsky every day and came to realise that his main problem was a pathological weakness for banality, conceit and the cheap pose. He was, of course, silly, or more exactly naïve, but kind and obliging by nature. He felt very sorry for the fortune teller, who had been deserted by her husband and was ill with tuberculosis. She boarded with Rachinsky's mother, and he had insisted that she prepare special meals with extra fat for the woman. He had apparently read somewhere that consumptives need lots of fat 'to lubricate their lungs'.

His banality was incorrigible. Even in our conversations about politics and the situation in Russia, Rachinsky always loved to attempt brilliant displays of wit with his dubious expressions. Discussing Rasputin, he once said that the man's character had displayed 'a cynicism that ascended to a state of grace'. He shed bad verse and feeble epigrams like a moulting cat. At home, however, he was an attentive host. The better I got to know him, the more I pitied this slightly insane character.

He suggested that I also board at his mother's, and this saved my life since the only restaurant in town, at the hotel, was a foul-smelling pothouse. I accepted his offer and was pleasantly surprised when I first

arrived to find that his mother, a retired schoolteacher, was a most charming and intelligent elderly woman. She regarded her dear Misha ('Miguel' did not exist at home) as obviously unbalanced and was hurt by his clothes and affectations but still she treated him with great tenderness. It was the tenderness of a mother whose son is a freak.

The three of us – the fortune teller, Osipenko and I – met daily for dinner at the Rachinskys'. The schoolteacher turned out to be a fiery young man, clever and energetic. He loved to argue, was fanatical about literature, and wouldn't tolerate any of Rachinsky's 'aesthetic quips'. Put in his place, Rachinsky could only grin with embarrassment and polish his pince-nez. He never dared to argue with the schoolteacher.

The fortune teller sat wrapped up in her shawl and did not say a word. She only liked to talk to Rachinsky's mother, Varvara Petrovna, and then only if the men couldn't hear them. It seems she was ashamed of her line of work and often arrived with tear-stained eyes. All I knew was that she had been born in St Petersburg and her former husband was a lawyer. When she wasn't telling fortunes, she helped the doctors and nurses in the hospital tending to the wounded. The hospital was just a temporary operation that had been set up in the local parish school.

I decided to pay a visit to the nearby village of Bogovo to see how the peasants were getting by and what they wanted. Bogovo stood on the banks of the Krasivaya Mecha, made famous by Turgenev. The river was covered with ice and snow, except where the black water rushed through the mill-race. Melting icicles dropped into the water with a loud ping. The first February thaw had arrived, bringing with it a wet fog, blustery winds and the smell of smoke.

In Bogovo I had an encounter that at first struck me as simply curious, but a few days later revealed to me a larger symbolic significance. The peasants of Bogovo, just like all the peasants around Moscow, wanted one thing – an end to the war. No one knew what would come next, but everyone was certain that once it was over, life would not go back to the way it had been. With the war over, justice would at long last be restored.

'The trouble is, no one knows what justice is!' the village cobbler, a hollow-chested little man, said to me. 'Travel all over Russia, ask everyone what it is, and you'll see that they all have their own notion of justice. It's different in every village! But if you could take all these notions and mix them together, then you'd come up with a single shared idea of justice, an all-Russian truth and justice, if you like.'

'So, what's your local truth and justice?' I asked.

'It's right over there!' said the cobbler, pointing at a hill across the river. There, surrounded by a scruffy old orchard, stood a rundown manor house. Although not large, it boasted the features of the Empire style so popular with the nobility during the reign of Alexander I – a façade with peeling columns; tall, narrow windows with half-moon pediments; two low semi-circular wings; and a broken wrought-iron gate of exceptional beauty.

'Will you please explain to me', I asked, 'what that old house has to do with your local idea of justice?'

'Just go over there, go and meet the master, then you'll understand. See for yourself, who you think has the right to that house, and garden, and the five acres of land it sits on. Mind you, the master's a bit barmy. That'd be Shuisky. Goes about in rags. It's unlikely he'd let you in to talk. You'll need to think up some sort of story first.'

'What kind of story?'

'Tell him you want to rent his dacha for the summer. You've come to talk over the details.'

I walked up to the house along a path largely hidden beneath the snow. The windows were boarded up with old rotting planks. The front porch was thick with snowdrifts. I walked around to the back and found a little door covered with torn felt. I knocked hard. The house was deathly quiet. 'It's empty,' I said to myself, 'no one lives here.' Just then the door flew open. Standing there was a wizened old man in a black quilted dressing gown riddled with holes and belted with a towel. A little silk cap sat perched on his head. His face was swathed in a dirty bandage, from which tufts of cotton wool, brown from iodine, stuck out like whiskers.

The old man gave me an angry look with his bright blue eyes and asked in a high-pitched voice: 'What can I do for you, sir?'

I told him exactly what the cobbler had suggested.

'You're not a relation of the Bunins?' he asked suspiciously.

'No, certainly not!'

'Then come in.'

He led me to what must have been the only inhabited room in the house. It was littered with rags and rubbish. A small iron stove in the middle of the room glowed with heat. Each gust of wind blew the smoke back down the chimney and into the room. In the corner I spied a magnificent round stove made

of glazed Dutch tiles. Nearly half the tiles were missing, and the little holes were full of dusty medicine phials, yellowed paper bags and rotten, worm-infested apples. Over a trestle bed covered with a mangy sheepskin hung the portrait of a woman in a heavy gilt frame. She wore a gossamer pale blue dress and had white powdered hair and the same blue eyes as the old man. I had the feeling that I had somehow ended up back in Gogol's Russia of the early nineteenth century.

'Are you a nobleman?' the old man asked.

I said yes, I was. It seemed like the only thing to say.

'As for your present occupation, I don't have the slightest interest,' he said. 'They've invented such outlandish ones you can't make head or tail of them. Would you believe there's now something called an Assessor of Statutory Prices? Pure rot! It's these Romanovs, I tell you. I'll let you the dacha for the summer, but only on one condition: that you don't keep a goat. I had that Bunin here three years ago. A most dubious character. A real Judas! He brought goats with him, and they had a fine time nibbling on my apple trees.'

'The writer Bunin?' I asked.

'No, his brother, the tax collector. The writer's been here too. A bit more respectable than his brother the official, but I'll tell you, I don't see what he has to be so conceited about either. Petty gentry, nothing more!'

I decided to defend Bunin in terms the old man would understand. 'Come now,' I said, 'the Bunins are an old noble clan.'

'Old?' he asked derisively. He shook his head and shot me a look that said I was a hopeless dimwit. 'Old? Well, don't you forget we're older. My family's listed in the Velvet Book.[8] Had you learned your Russian history you would know just how ancient my family is.'

Only then did I recall that the cobbler had told me the old man's name – Shuisky. Was it really possible that before me stood the last of the Princes Shuisky, one of whom had been a tsar? Good Lord!

'I'll charge you fifty roubles for the entire summer,' he went on. 'I know that's a lot, but I've got a lot of expenses. My wife and I separated last year. The old witch is now living in Yefremov, and I have to send her ten roubles or so every now and then. It's just a waste. She turns round and gives it to her lovers. Hanging from an aspen tree would be too good for her.'

'How old is she?' I asked.

'In her seventies,' said Shuisky, angrily. 'As for your staying here, we'll sign a detailed contract. It's the only way.'

I agreed. I had the feeling I was witnessing a rare piece of theatre. Shuisky removed a thick yellow piece of paper embossed with a two-headed eagle from a torn folder, picked up a quill, sharpened it with a broken pen-knife, and dipped it in a bottle of iodine.

'Damn! That ridiculous fool Vasilisa never puts anything back in its place.'

Vasilisa, so I learned later, was an old woman from Bogovo who used to help make the communion bread in the local church. She came to Shuisky's twice a week to do a bit of tidying, chop firewood and prepare his porridge.

Shuisky found the jar of Metamorphosis face cream in which he kept the ink and started writing, still grumbling about what the world had come to: 'The Russian language has gone to hell. Ridiculous new-fangled words right and left. Might as well be speaking Tatar. Everywhere you look, nothing but more of that Romanov nonsense. And they say Nikolashka has invited some depraved man to dine with him at his table. Thinks he's a tsar! Hah! He's no tsar, he's a little mama's boy!'

'Why do you wrap your face in cotton wool?' I asked.

'I rub iodine on it, so naturally I have to wrap it up with cotton wool.'

'But why?'

'For my nerves,' Shuisky said curtly. 'Here you are. Read it and then sign your name at the bottom.'

He handed me the piece of paper written in a neat, old-fashioned hand. There was a long list of conditions for my living on the rundown estate. I particularly remember the first clause: 'I, the undersigned Paustovsky, do promise not to avail myself of any fruit from the orchard, it being understood that said orchard, and the fruit therein, has been let to Gavriushka Sitnikov, smallholder of the town of Yefremov.'

I signed the utterly useless document and asked about the deposit. It made no sense to hand over money for a house I never intended to live in, but I had to play my role through to the end.

'Deposit? What are you talking about?' Shuisky snapped. 'What sort of nobleman mentions such a thing? We'll settle up when you come back. My regards to you. I'm sick and so won't show you out. See to it you shut the door firmly behind you.'

I walked back to Yefremov. The farther away I got from Bogovo, the more bizarre this encounter with

Shuisky seemed. Upon my return Varvara Petrovna confirmed that the old man truly was the last Prince Shuisky. True, he had a son, but about forty years ago he had sold him for ten thousand roubles to a childless Polish magnate. The Pole needed an heir so that after his death his vast wealth would not be divided up among his distant relations, and his crafty personal secretary had found for him a young boy of excellent lineage to purchase and adopt.

A light snow was falling. The oil lamp hissed softly. I remained at the Rachinskys' after dinner, reading Sergeev-Tsensky's *The Sorrow of the Fields*.[9] Rachinsky sat at the dinner table writing his advice to women readers. After he had put down a few lines, he would lean back in his chair and read them to himself, a satisfied smile spreading across his face. Varvara Petrovna knitted, and the fortune teller, huddled up in an armchair, sat quietly lost in thought and staring at the diamonds on her fingers.

All of a sudden there was a loud knocking on the window. We jumped. The knocking was so fast and agitated that I knew something had happened. Rachinsky went to open the door. Varvara Petrovna crossed herself. The fortune teller was the only one of us who didn't move. Osipenko burst into the room wearing a hat and coat and not bothering to take off his snow-boots.

'There's revolution in Petrograd!' he shouted. 'The government's been overthrown!'

His voice broke. He collapsed into a chair and burst into tears. For a moment there was nothing but silence. The only sound was Osipenko sobbing like a child. My heart was pounding. I choked and felt tears rolling down my cheeks.

Rachinsky grabbed Osipenko by the shoulder. 'When? How? Tell us!' he cried.

'Here . . . here . . .' Osipenko muttered, pulling a long strip of ticker tape from his coat pocket. 'I've come straight from the telegraph office . . . It's all right here . . .'

I took it from him and began to read out loud the proclamation of the Provisional Government. My hands were shaking. At last! The entire country had known for months that something like this was coming, but it had happened so fast and unexpectedly. But out here, in sleepy, forgotten Yefremov, there were no signs of revolution. Moscow newspapers were few and arrived three days late. Barking dogs and the banging of the watchman's clappers were the only sounds at night in the high street. It was easy to think that nothing had changed here since the sixteenth century – that there was no railway, no telegraph, no war, no Moscow, no history.

And yet here it was – revolution! My mind was a confused whirl of ideas, but one thing was clear: something tremendous had begun, something that no one and nothing had the power to stop. The great event that people had been awaiting for over a century had now happened, now, on this day, one that had begun just like every other.

'What should we do?' Osipenko asked, quivering with nervous energy. 'We've got to do something at once.'

Rachinsky then said something for which all his failings could be forgiven: 'We've got to print copies of the proclamation and post them up around town. And then get in touch with Moscow. Let's go!'

The three of us – Osipenko, Rachinsky and I – headed out. Only Varvara Petrovna and the fortune teller stayed at home. As we were leaving, Rachinsky's mother stood in front of the icons, crossing herself and repeating over and over, 'At last, dear God! At last, dear God!' The fortune teller sat as motionless as before.

A man came running towards us down the empty street. In the dim light of the street lamp I could see that he was barefoot and without a hat or coat. In one hand he held a cobbler's boot tree. He threw himself upon us. 'Good people!' he screamed and then grabbed me by the arm. 'Have you heard? There's no more tsar! Now there's only Russia!' He gave each one of us a hearty kiss and ran off down the street, sobbing and muttering to himself.

'What's wrong with us?' said Osipenko. 'Why haven't we congratulated each other?' We stopped and exchanged hearty kisses ourselves. Rachinsky then headed to the telegraph office to await news from Petrograd and Moscow, while Osipenko and I went to find the little out-of-the-way printer's shop that made all the advertisements, government notices and orders of the military governor. It was closed. We were trying to break the lock when a man with the key came bustling up, opened the door and turned on the light. He was the town's only typesetter and printer. We never found out how he happened to be in the area at that moment.

'Let's go, start sorting!' I said.

I dictated the text of the proclamation to the typesetter. He sorted the type, stopping now and then to wipe the tears from his eyes. Soon we received another message – an order from Nekrasov, the Provisional Government's minister of transport, addressed to every Russian to stop the emperor's train wherever it was.

Events in Russia were moving with the speed of an avalanche.

I read the first copy of the proclamation. The letters jumped and blurred before my eyes. The printer's office was now full of people who had somehow heard that we were printing leaflets about the revolution. They grabbed handfuls of them and ran out to post them on walls, fences and lamp-posts around town. It was one o'clock in the morning, when Yefremov was usually fast asleep. Suddenly, at this ungodly hour, the cathedral bell rang out. It chimed once, twice and then a third time. It went on and on, growing faster and louder, its peals waking the entire town. Soon it was joined by the bells of the many neighbouring churches.

Lights went on in windows throughout Yefremov. People poured onto the streets, not bothering to shut their doors behind them. Strangers wept and embraced each other. From the railway station came the sharp, jubilant whistling of locomotives. Somewhere from deep among the crowded street, voices rose, softly at first, then louder and louder, singing 'The Workers' Marseillaise':

> Let us denounce the old world,
> Let us shake its dust from our feet!

The ringing sounds of a brass band joined in with the choir of voices for the chorus:

> Rise up, working people, and join together!
> Arise against our enemies, hungry brother!
> Let the people's cry for vengeance be heard!
> Forward! Forward! Forward! Forward! Forward!

On a table smeared with printer's ink, Osipenko wrote the first Order of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Yefremov. No one had set up such a committee. No one knew who its members were, for one simple reason: there was no such committee. Osipenko had merely decided to take matters into his own hands and improvise:

> Pending the appointment of new civic authorities by the government of liberated Russia, the Provisional Revolutionary Committee of Yefremov calls upon all citizens to remain calm and orders as follows:
>
> The administration of the urban and rural districts will be the responsibility of the District Executive Board led by its chairman, Citizen Kushelëv.
>
> Citizen Kushelëv is hereby named Government Commissar until further notice.
>
> Police and gendarmerie will immediately surrender their arms to the District Executive Board.
>
> A People's Militia will be formed to ensure order in the streets.
>
> The work of all government departments and private businesses will continue.
>
> The garrison quartered in Yefremov will take the oath of allegiance to the new government following the example set by the garrisons of Petrograd, Moscow and other cities across Russia.

Rachinsky, exhausted and pale yet resolute, turned up at the printer's office at dawn. He now had an enormous red bow on his coat. Approaching the table, he threw down a policeman's hat and a holstered Nagant revolver. The railway workers had disarmed the bearded policeman and Rachinsky, who had witnessed it, had brought these back as trophies to the revolutionary committee.

Rachinsky was then followed by a tall, white-haired man with a gentle, confused expression – the new commissar of the Provisional Government, Kushelëv. He never even asked how he had been appointed to this important position. A new proclamation was quickly put out with his signature congratulating the town's inhabitants on Russia's liberation from centuries of oppression. A meeting of representatives of every social class and organisation was set for one o'clock that day to discuss urgent matters in light of the recent events. After signing the proclamation, Kushelëv wept. Never in my life have I seen so many tears of joy as in those days.

His daughter, a tall, shy girl in a short coat and a shawl, had come with him. As he was signing the document, she stroked his head and said in a quivering voice: 'Calm down, Papa, there's no need to get so overwrought.' As a young man Kushelëv had spent ten years in exile in the far north for his membership of a revolutionary students' group.

We entered into a period of happy days full of noise and confusion. A general meeting open to all citizens continued around the clock at the office of the District Executive Board. The board was renamed the Convention. Its office steamed with the breath of hundreds. Red flags fluttered in the February wind. Villagers poured into town for the latest news and directives. 'When will there be word about land for the peasants?' they asked. The streets around the board's office were crowded with carts and littered

with straw. Everywhere, people were debating and arguing about land, compensation and peace. Elderly men with red armbands and revolvers on their belts – the People's Militia – patrolled the road junctions. Staggering news kept arriving. Nicholas had abdicated the throne at the railway station in Pskov. Passenger rail traffic throughout the entire country had been stopped.

Prayers were said in Yefremov's churches for the new government. Convicts were released from prison, schools were closed, and excited pupils ran about the town delivering the commissar's orders and notices. On the fifth or sixth day I met my cobbler friend from Bogovo. He told me that upon learning of the revolution, Shuisky had begun preparing to move into town. He put a ladder up to his tiled stove, climbed to the top, pulled out a bag of gold coins, climbed down, fell, and died that evening. The cobbler had come to hand Shuisky's money over to the commissar of the Provisional Government.

It seemed as though the town and its people had been transformed. Russia had found its voice and begun to speak. Even in tongue-tied Yefremov inspiring orators appeared out of nowhere. Most of them were railway workers. They reduced the listening women to tears. Gone were the cowed, sullen expressions. The faces of the people of Yefremov looked younger, their eyes shone with goodness and the joy of a new beginning. They were no longer subjects. They were citizens now. And as though by decree, the weather was fine. The days were sunny, the flags snapped in the warm breeze, and white clouds sailed joyfully over the town. You could feel the breath of early spring all around you, in the heavy blue shadows and in the raw nights alive with the noise of people.

I was dazed, intoxicated. I could not imagine what would happen next. I longed to head back to Moscow, but the trains had stopped running.

'Wait,' Osipenko said to me, 'this is only the beginning of great things to come for Russia. Try to keep a cool head and a warm heart. You need to preserve your strength.'

Commissar Kushelëv signed a pass for me and I left for Moscow on the first possible train. No one saw me off. There was no time for that now. The train was slow. I couldn't sleep. I sat thinking about the past few years, going over them in my mind month by month and trying to locate some unifying thread to my life. Try as I might, however, I couldn't. There was one thing that I did know for certain. I had never once during these years given any thought to my comfort or material well-being. I had known only one passion – to become a writer. Now, travelling that night on the train to Moscow, I became aware that I was at last at the point of being able to put into words what I understood by beauty and justice, to express and to communicate to others my perception of life, my vision of human happiness, dignity and freedom. This, I realised, was my life's purpose. Only now was I able to see it clearly.

I didn't know what would come next. But I knew that I would continue to strive with all my strength to become a writer. This would be my way of serving my people, of loving our magical language and our remarkable land. I would work as long as I could hold a pen and my heart, overflowing with the beauty of life, was still beating.

At dawn on a misty March day, I finally arrived in Moscow, this jubilant, seething, harrowing city. I had long believed that life held out before me the promise of many remarkable things – joys, struggles, loves, sorrows and tragedies – and this presentiment had been the great happiness of my youth. Then I could not be certain the promise would be fulfilled. Now, time had proved me right.

[1] Titular character of a story by Gogol (1835, revised in 1842) about a Cossack warrior and his two sons.

[2] Alexander Kuprin (1870–1938), writer of short fiction, novelist, friend of Chekhov and Bunin.

[3] Vladimir Gilyarovsky (1853–1935), poet, actor, raconteur, journalist and memoirist, known for his writings on Moscow.

[4] The 'Time of Troubles' was a period of political instability, famine and foreign invasion between 1598 and 1613.

[5] Turgenev's winged words of 1882 on 'the great, mighty, true and free Russian language that could have been given only to "a great people"'.

[6] Nikolai Vtorov (1866–1916), immensely wealthy entrepreneur and banker, known as the 'Russian Morgan'.

[7] A reference to the story 'Kasyan of the Beautiful Lands' in Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1852).

[8] An official seventeenth-century registry, bound in red velvet, of Russia's aristocratic elite.

[9] Sergei Sergeev-Tsensky (1875–1958), prolific writer, poet and author of this 1909 work on the plight of

rural Russia.

Book Three

THE DAWN OF AN UNCERTAIN AGE

70

Whirlpool

In the course of a few months, Russia said everything that it had kept to itself for centuries. Day and night, from February until the autumn of 1917, the entire country seethed from end to end like one continuous, raucous meeting. Crowds of people shouted in city squares, in front of monuments, in railway stations smelling of chlorine, in factories, villages and markets, and in every courtyard and stairway of every house. Oaths, appeals, denunciations, heated oratory – all this would suddenly be drowned out in furious shouts of 'Down with him!' or in hoarse, ecstatic cries of 'Hurrah!' The noise rumbled, like the thunder of heavy carts over cobblestones, from street to street.

The meetings in Moscow were particularly heated and inspired. Someone was always being tossed up in the air or pulled down off the Pushkin Monument by the belt of his greatcoat or kissed by men with bristly cheeks or extended a friendly greeting by a pair of calloused hands. An *intelligènt* had his hat knocked off one minute only to be raised up triumphantly the next by the anonymous crowd. While holding onto his wobbly pince-nez, he hurled curses upon unnamed enemies of Russia's freedom. All around came frenzied outbursts of clapping that sounded like the drumming of hail on the pavement. Indeed, the spring of 1917 was cold, and hard little balls of hail often covered the young grass along the city's boulevards.

No one ever asked for permission to speak at these meetings. Everyone assumed they already had it. Front-line soldiers were sure of a ready hearing, as was a Frenchman by the name of Jacques Sadoul, an officer, member of the French Socialist Party, later a communist, who was stranded at the time in Russia. His light blue greatcoat was always moving back and forth between Moscow's two busiest meeting places – the monuments to Pushkin and Skobelev. Any soldier who claimed to be back from the front was first put through a noisy interrogation: 'Which front? What division?' voices shouted from the crowd. 'What regiment? Who was your regimental commander?' If the soldier got confused amid the tumult and was slow to answer, someone yelled, 'The front all right! He's been defending Khodynka Field right here in Moscow! Get him out of here!' They would drag him from the rostrum, and the man would be swallowed up by the crowd.

A formidable tactic was needed to win the crowd over and hold its attention. Once, a bearded soldier in a greatcoat as stiff as tree bark climbed up onto the pedestal of the Pushkin Monument. 'What division? What unit?' people yelled at him.

The soldier scowled angrily. 'What are ya all shoutin' about?' he roared back. 'Bet if I looked, I'd find a photograph of Wilhelm in every third man's pocket. A good half of you are spies! And that's a fact! Who the hell are you to tell a Russian soldier to shut up?'

That was a formidable tactic. The crowd fell silent.

'You go and feed lice in the trenches like I have,' he bellowed, 'then you can ask questions! Tsarist scum! Bastards! Just because you've put on those red ribbons, don't kid yourselves you're fooling us. It's not enough you're selling us out to the bourgeoisie like we're a bunch of market chickens, no, you're gonna pluck us of every last feather too, eh? It's 'cause of the likes of you there's treason at the front and all over this rotten land of ours. Comrades, all you soldiers from the front! It's you I'm talking to now! Do me a favour, don't let any of those citizens over there leave. Search 'em and check their papers. If anybody's got anything on him, we'll deal with him ourselves. We don't need any government commissar to tell us what we can do! Hurrah!'

The soldier tore off his hat and waved it over his head. There were a few scattered cheers of 'Hurrah!' but nothing more. Then an ominous movement started in the crowd – soldiers, linking arms, began to encircle it. Who knows how this would have ended if someone hadn't thought to notify the Soviet of Deputies, which sent a lorry full of armed workers to restore order.

Gradually, the meetings in the various parts of Moscow assumed their own distinct character. The speakers at the Skobelev Monument were chiefly representatives of the different political parties – from the Kadets and the Popular Socialist Party to the Bolsheviks. The speeches here were heated, but serious. No one was allowed to spout twaddle in front of Skobelev. The moment a speaker tried something like that, the crowd yelled in one voice: 'To hell with you! You belong over at Taganskaya Square!' There you

could indeed say whatever you had on your mind, be it that Kerensky[1] was a converted Jew from the village of Shpola or that the monks at the Donskoy Monastery had been caught hiding a hundred thousand gold roubles in the hollowed-out cores of pickled apples.

One day that spring (it was already May, but no one seemed to have noticed that the ice had gone out on the Moscow River or that the bird-cherries were blooming), I stood in the crowd in front of the Skobelev Monument. A scuffle had broken out between the SRs and the Bolsheviks. All of a sudden, up climbed Rachinsky onto the pedestal. I literally jumped with surprise. I had never before seen Rachinsky in Moscow. He removed his wide-brimmed velours hat, raised his stick with the silver naked mermaid up high, called for silence, and cried out in a voice overflowing with pathos: 'Black clouds seek to erase the radiant sun of our freedom! Permit me, a poor, humble poet living in a garret, to lift up my indignant voice . . .'

'Chuck him in the dump!' came a clear and determined although rather coarse voice from the crowd.

'Off to Taganskaya with you!' the crowd shouted all together. 'You, up there, whoever's closest, pull him down!'

'This is usurpation!' Rachinsky cried desperately. 'The voice of the senseless rabble!'

This made no difference, and he was not allowed to go on. Raising his eyes dolefully to the heavens, Rachinsky shrugged his shoulders, and then, preserving his dignity, hopped down from the pedestal and disappeared into the crowd.

The meetings at the Pushkin Monument addressed all sorts of issues but, as it is now popular to say, always remained 'on a high level'. The speakers here were typically students. I was then working for a different newspaper and had to attend the meetings as part of my job. The meetings revealed the slightest shifts in the mood of Muscovites, and we journalists could always pick up lots of news at them.

My newspaper had the strange name of the *Moscow Municipality Gazette*. The Moscow municipality no longer existed, nor did any such gazette speaking on its behalf. It's possible the name came from the fact that the editorial offices had been set up in the building that had once belonged to the Moscow municipal governor on Tverskoy Boulevard. It was a small paper edited by 'Don Aminado', a light-minded, carefree poet-journalist. No one knew his real name.

The paper published telegrams with earth-shattering news that arrived from all over the country, a chronicle of Moscow life, and, now and then, orders issued by Dr Kishkin, commissar of the Provisional Government. No one ever even considered carrying out these orders, and so the figure of Dr Kishkin became merely ornamental. He was a dry stick of a man with a greying beard and the eyes of a martyr awaiting the unavoidable end. He went about in an elegant frock coat with silk lapels and a red cockade in his buttonhole.

With each passing day the speeches of the orators became more clearly defined, and from the confusion of slogans and demands two camps began to emerge that reflected the main division within the country: that of the Bolsheviks and workers and that of the Provisional Government's supporters, mostly the well-intentioned but spineless and distraught intelligentsia. True, not all of the intelligentsia sided with the new government, but most of it did.

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The state was disintegrating like a pile of wet sand. The provinces refused to submit to Petrograd's authority. They lived their own separate life, no one knew how, and struggled with their own seething turmoil. At the front, the army was melting fast. Kerensky dashed about the country, trying to hold it together with his ecstatic eloquence. Lacking clear ideas and conviction, all he could offer instead were pompous phrases, operatic poses and grandiloquent but irrelevant gestures. Thus, he appeared on the parapets of the trenches to harangue thousands of soldiers at the front, never once realising how utterly ridiculous he looked. Once he tore off the epaulettes of a sick, elderly soldier who had refused to return to the trenches and then, pointing authoritatively to the east as though he were a Roman emperor, screamed at the man: 'You coward! Back to the rear! We will not kill you – your conscience will do that for us!' He uttered these words in a tragic voice, tears in his eyes, while the soldiers simply turned their backs on him and cursed.

I often encountered this man with his puffy, greenish face, crimson eyelids and thin, greying crew-cut. He walked with headlong speed, forcing his aides to chase after him, and would then stop and turn round just as quickly, frightening them. He carried his wounded right arm in a black sling outside his rumpled field jacket, which lay in pleats across his stomach. Shiny brown leggings creaked and glistened on his long, thin legs.

In a barking staccato, he tossed clipped phrases at the crowd and then paused, as though out of breath. Not only did he love noisy words, he believed in them. He believed they could fly, like a tocsin, out over

the agitated country and inspire the people to glory and sacrifice. Having uttered these noisy words, Kerensky would collapse into his armchair, sobbing and shaking, as his aides rushed to give him a sedative. He reeked of essence of valerian like some nervous woman. That smell, which brought to mind the fusty air of old-fashioned apartments, gave him away. Or, at least it did to me at the time. For some reason I was convinced that medicinal smells like this were incompatible with the high calling of a champion of the people.

I soon realised that Kerensky was nothing more than a sick man with a large streak of Dostoevskyism in him. He was an actor who believed in his great messianic calling, unaware he was rushing blindly over a precipice. This hysteric, carried along on the crest of the first wave of the revolution like so much froth, was undoubtedly honest in his aggrandised convictions and his devotion to Russia. Since the days of old Muscovy, Russia has had its share of holy fools, and there was something of them in Kerensky.

I happened to see most of the leaders of the February Revolution. Although I had trouble making sense of the confusing situation of those days, nonetheless I was struck by the disparity of these men. Foreign Minister Milyukov, a lordly professor of history, had nothing in common with Kerensky. His bluish-silver hair looked sterilised and icy, just like the rest of him, all the way down to his every measured, correct word. In those turbulent times, he was like a visitor from some other well-organised, academic planet.

A large herd of soap-box orators appeared overnight. They sprang up like mushrooms after rain. The most important thing was to shout louder than your opponent. Cheap demagoguery found a receptive, well-manured soil. Orators were even imported from abroad. Albert Thomas, French minister of armaments, arrived from Paris. He came to persuade the 'heroic Russian people' to remain a loyal ally and stay in the war. A short-legged man with a reddish beard and an elegant frock coat, he displayed in his speeches a peerless example of the art of shrillness and the expressive gesture. I once heard him speak from the balcony of what is now the Moscow Soviet (then the residence of the commissar of the Provisional Government). Thomas spoke in French to a crowd of mostly soldiers and workers from the suburbs. No more than a dozen or so of them could have known the language, but you didn't need to speak French to understand what Thomas was saying.

Prancing up and down the balcony on his fat little legs, Thomas presented a pantomime of what, in his opinion, would happen to Russia if it left the war. He twisted his moustache like the kaiser's, he squinted rapaciously, he leapt into the air and grabbed the throat of an imaginary Russia. Holding it in a death grip, he hissed, and trampled and kicked it with his polished boots to the accompaniment of war cries and the snarls of an enraged tiger. Wilhelm's terrifying dance over the prostrate body of Russia went on for several minutes. Stupefied by this circus act, the crowd held its breath.

Then a hollow sort of roar could be heard building among the crowd. Thomas wiped his red face with a scented handkerchief and with a flick of the wrist put his glossy top hat back on at its usual jaunty angle. He listened to the crowd and smiled. In that roar he was convinced he heard approval.

The roar grew louder, and as it did it grew more threatening, until it reached the point where cries of 'Shame! Clown! Down with him!' could be heard, followed by shrill whistling. Someone kindly approached Thomas, took him by the arm, and escorted him off the balcony. Next, out came the Belgian Socialist Vandervelde, a man with an insufferably ascetic face and a clerical coat buttoned to the neck. He started to speak quietly, without intonation, chewing his words with his thin, dry lips. It seemed he wanted to put the crowd to sleep, and it did indeed thin out until only a handful of people were left below the balcony, listening, apparently, out of politeness. Vandervelde said the same thing as Thomas. In a half-hearted way he called for loyalty to 'our holy military alliance'.

Music could be heard coming from the direction of the Strastnoy Monastery. It grew louder and began to thunder:

> From the people we've come,
> Children of toil, one and all,
> 'Fraternal alliance and freedom'
> Is our rallying call!

Columns of workers from the Presnya district approached down Tverskaya Street. Banners of red calico fluttered past Vandervelde demanding 'Peace to the Huts, War on the Palaces!' and 'All Power to the Soviets!' and 'End the War!' Vandervelde moved his lips for a few more minutes, then folded up his notes and slowly walked off, leaning not on a stick but his umbrella, neatly rolled and protected by a silk sleeve. None of the workers noticed him. They sang as they walked:

> Everything on which the throne stands –
> By the workers was it done . . .

We've cast bullets with our hands,
And we'll fix the bayonet to our gun!

Looking back today, after so many years, on the first months of the revolution, one begins to understand how unstable and filled with a sense of unavoidable impending change they were. The old order had been destroyed. But deep down in our souls, few of us believed that the collapse of the monarchy meant that the revolution was complete. The new February regime was, of course, nothing more than an interlude in Russian history.

Perhaps the transient leaders of the country understood this at the time, and this weakened their resistance to the new future, hostile to them but inevitable, that future announced by Lenin from atop the armoured car outside the Finland station: 'The dawn of the world socialist revolution has already begun!' It turned out that all that had been so easily achieved and hastily put together after February was nothing but the very first steps of a new age. This became clear to everyone only much later. At the time, we were only vaguely aware of this. The times were too charged, too many fantastic things were happening every day. We didn't have the inner strength, or the time, to make sense of history moving at lightning speed. The thunder produced by the collapse of the old world was a continuous roar in our ears. The idyllic generosity of the first days of the revolution faded. Whole worlds crumbled and collapsed into dust.

Nearly the entire intelligentsia – heirs of the great, humanistic Russian tradition of Pushkin and Herzen, Tolstoy and Chekhov – found itself overwhelmed and confused. It became indisputably clear that although the intelligentsia had been capable of creating high spiritual values, it found itself, with few exceptions, powerless to lay the foundations of a new state. Russian culture had largely grown up in the struggle for freedom against autocracy. This struggle had defined the intelligentsia's thinking, it had set the course for the development of noble aspirations and civic courage. With the old order in ruins, its task was no longer to sow among the people textbook notions of 'the good, the rational, the eternal', but to build a new social order, immediately and with their own hands, to govern skilfully this vast and utterly neglected country.

The country's troubled, almost unimaginable condition could not go on for long. The very survival of the people demanded a clear purpose and a channelling of energies. The establishment of justice and freedom, it turned out, required hard work and even ruthlessness. Such things, we learned, do not come of themselves in response to the clashing of cymbals and the rapturous cheers of the citizens.

These were the first lessons of the revolution. For the first time, the Russian intelligentsia was brought face to face with its own ideals. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and no one could let it pass. The strong downed it and took their place alongside the people. The weak either degenerated or perished. Thus began the long and formidable era of creating a new civic order. But, again, at that time few people had thought these matters through to the end – they were little more than feelings, the first inklings of larger ideas. Most people drifted along with the current of events, wishing just to survive, if only a bit longer, so they might witness the course of history and catch a glimpse of the shore to which Russia would eventually be driven.

As for me, I had greeted the February Revolution with a schoolboy's delight, even though I was already twenty-five years old. I naïvely believed that overnight this revolution could make us all into better people and turn the bitterest of enemies into friends. I thought that for the sake of the revolution's incontrovertible gains people would reject the unworthy remnants of the past – all that was mean and shabby and particularly the lust for wealth, national enmity and the oppression of one's fellow man.

I had always been certain that there was an innate goodness in all of us, a goodness that merely needed to be summoned from the depths of our being. But I soon learned that these starry-eyed notions were little more than dust and ashes. Every day cruel evidence was rubbed in my face that people are not so easily changed and that the revolution had yet to eliminate hatred or distrust. I drove this unpleasant thought away, but it refused to leave and poisoned my happiness. I became increasingly angry. I felt a special anger for those polished, liberal *intelligènty* who, in my opinion, allowed their ill-will towards the people, over whom they had so recently been in ecstasy, to make them stupider by the day. That did not mean, however, that I was ready to fully embrace the October Revolution. I agreed with much, but much I rejected, especially what seemed to me its contempt for the culture of the past.

Prevented by my idealistic upbringing from whole-heartedly accepting the October Revolution, I lived through the first two or three years not as a participant, but a deeply interested onlooker. Not until 1920 did I realise that there was no other path forward than the one chosen by my people. At once, I felt relief. There followed a time of faith and great hopes. My life gained meaning and purpose, and from then on I devoted it, more or less, to serving the people in the best way I knew how – through my

writing. No one can say whether it is better to arrive at conviction through doubt or never to have doubted at all. Regardless, what always seemed to me to be required of everyone in our revolutionary age was a profound commitment to freedom, justice and humanity, together with honesty towards oneself.

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The cold spring of 1917 was followed by a sweltering summer. A hot wind blew clouds of torn and crumpled newspapers along the pavements. Almost every day new papers appeared in Moscow, sometimes of the most unusual orientations, such as those of the theosophists or the anarchists, whose slogan was 'Anarchy breeds order'. Noisy and largely illiterate, most of these papers lasted only a few days. The wind tugged at the posters – accusatory, denunciatory or calming – that covered the walls. The air smelled of printers' ink and rye bread.

The army had brought the village smell of bread with them. Ignoring Kerensky's shrill orders, the city filled with soldiers pouring in from the front. Moscow had become a noisy army camp. The streets and squares around the railway stations thronged with soldiers. The harsh smoke from their cheap *makhorka* cigarettes hung in the air over their makeshift quarters, giving Moscow the aura of a conquered city. The wind scattered flurries of chalky sunflower shells from one end of the square to the other. A red flag, tied to the martially raised bronze sword of Skobelev's monument, had long since faded in the sun but still waved triumphantly in the wind.

A mantle of dust lay over the city. Yellow street lamps burned sleepily both day and night. No one had remembered to put them out. To reduce the demand for electricity, the government decreed that the clocks be set back. Sunset was now at four o'clock in the afternoon. The whole city was on its feet. Flats stood empty. All night long people talked themselves hoarse at meetings, dragged themselves half asleep through the streets, or sat and argued in the squares and on the pavement. Strangers, thrown together at meetings, became either friends or enemies in an instant. Months had passed since the beginning of the revolution, but the excitement was as great as ever. The anxiety proved exhausting.

I decided to go and visit Mama late that summer. Life in Moscow had worn me out. During all that time I hadn't managed to read a thing other than a mass of hastily printed pamphlets, which reflected the implacable struggle among the various political parties. I dreamed of doing something impossible, like having the time to reread Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Now, it seemed to me as if the novel had been written a couple of centuries ago. Mama was living with Galya in Polesia, not far from the town of Chernobyl. My Aunt Vera from Kiev had a small estate there, Kopan, and Mama had agreed to live at Kopan and try to make some improvements. Mama loved anything to do with the land. At one time she had even dreamed of having me train to be an agronomist.

I passed through Kiev. Like Moscow, the whole city was one endless, seething meeting. The only difference was that the slogans were shouted in Ukrainian and instead of 'The Workers' Marseillaise' they sang 'Never Perished Is Ukraine' and Shevchenko's 'My Testament'.

I sailed along the Dnieper and Pripyat to Chernobyl on the *Volodya*, a small steamer that had lost a good deal of its paint. It was a most conscientious boat. Every now and then the captain, a Ukrainian with a dull moustache and a red ribbon on his chest, clambered up to the bridge and shouted, a smile on his face, through to the engine room: 'Come on now, *Volodya*! Give it all you've got! Do your part for the revolution!' And the *Volodya* did. With all its might, puffing clouds of steam and hurriedly slapping the water with its paddles, it picked up speed. But this didn't last for long. Soon the paddles once more lazily dipped into the water, and then the good-natured passengers stretched themselves out to rest on the deck, the sweet smell of marsh tea drifted from the banks, and the chirring of the grasshoppers faded into a soothing hum. I, too, dozed on the deck. From here, Moscow seemed nothing more than a strange dream.

It was forty versts by horse and cart through pine forests and heavy sand from Chernobyl to Kopan. The horses plodded along. The wheels creaked, the old harness smelled of tar. The driver, a little old man in a shabby brown coat, kept asking me: 'Still no news, is there, begging your pardon, of course, back in Moscow when we'll get the universal permission?'

'What permission?'

'For us peasant folk to take the land for ourselves and drive all the masters to the devil with our pitchforks. We've heard it said it's that Kerensky who's stopping us. We'll drive a stake through him too if it's the truth!'

Kopan turned out to be less of a manor and more of a rundown farm. In a clearing in the forest stood a large old farmhouse with a rotting thatched roof and a few ramshackle outbuildings. There wasn't even a fence. The woods hemmed the house in on all sides. After the commotion of Moscow, I found the

soughing of the pines especially majestic and calming.

When we met, Mama's lips quivered and she choked up, although she managed to hold held back her tears. She threw her arms around me and pressed her grey head to my shoulder. We stood like this for a long time, Mama straining not to cry. She had never clung to me before in this way, as though I were the older of us two, her protector and the only comfort in her unfortunate life. Galya held me tightly by my elbow, tears streaming from under her thick spectacles. She didn't think to wipe them away. I made a clumsy attempt to comfort Mama. I had thought of her often while I was away, but only now did I understand that life had left her nothing other than her bitter, deeply hidden love for the last two people she still had – Galya and me. It was these few crumbs of love that kept her alive. And it was for the sake of this love that she silently put up with the indignities of her rich relations, the back-breaking work and the complete isolation of these empty forests.

At dusk, Mama mentioned apologetically that it was now no longer possible to get paraffin – even in Chernobyl – so she and Galya spent their evenings by the light of a simple torch made of splintered pine. I had never seen such a thing before and rather liked its bright, crimson light. Picking at the fringe of her shawl with her hands, now dry and rough from working the earth, Mama said tentatively: 'Kostik, it would be so wonderful if you'd stay here with us for good. These are dangerous times. It'd be good to be together. We'd manage. True, we've got nothing to eat but potatoes and lard, but at least we'd have each other. What do you think, Kostik?'

She couldn't bring herself to look me in the face, and so kept her eyes lowered. I said nothing. Mama placed a fresh pine torch in the iron clamp. Her hands were shaking. 'Galya and I talked it over,' she said, not turning round, 'and if you're still set on becoming a writer then it doesn't matter where you live. It's quiet here. And no one will disturb you.'

I had to say something. 'I'll think it over,' I replied.

Mama came over and stroked my head. 'Oh, that's good,' she said, a sad smile on her face. 'That's good. Do that, Kostik, give it some thought.'

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No matter how long you live, Russia never ceases to amaze. For me, this amazement began in my childhood and it's still with me today. I know of no other country so full of surprises and contradictions. I became more convinced of this than ever the day after my arrival in Kopan.

I was telling Mama and Galya about life in Moscow since the revolution when I looked through the window and saw coming out of the woods towards the house an ancient, hunchbacked little monk in a dusty cassock and with a worn *skufia* on his head. He came in, crossed himself facing the empty corner where the icon should have been, bowed to us, and then asked Mama whether she would take some of his dried mushrooms in exchange for salt for the brethren. He seemed to have stepped out of the Russia from the time before Peter the Great.

Mama had salt. She poured out a quarter of a bag for the monk but didn't take his mushrooms. In this wooded area, there were more mushrooms than people knew what to do with. She offered the monk tea. He sat at the table, not removing his skull-cap and sipping his tea through a lump of sugar. A few tears trickled down his cheeks, which were as yellow as church candles. He carefully wiped them away with the edge of his cassock and said: 'So the Lord has granted me to drink tea with sugar one last time before I die. Truly, the Lord has shown me mercy. He has deigned to show pity on my poor cold bones.'

Mama went to fetch something in the next room. I followed and asked her where the monk had appeared from. She said that for ages now there had been a small monastery deep in the woods on the banks of the river Uzh about ten versts from Kopan. Since the revolution, most of the younger monks had left and only a few frail elders remained. 'You should go and have a look,' she said. 'Talk to them. You might find it of interest.'

A few days later I visited the monastery. The woods were dark and cluttered with fallen trees. There, in the middle of the forest with no clearing around, I came upon a tall stockade of blackened logs. I had seen such stockades in paintings of old monastic settlements by Roerich[2] and Nesterov. I walked along the outside until I came to the gate. It was barred. I knocked for a long time until it was opened by the same monk who had come for salt. I walked into a courtyard overgrown with grass and saw a small crooked church built of rough-hewn pine logs. I felt as though I had stumbled back into ancient Muscovy. Old men could be heard chanting in the church. Now and then a muffled clang came from the belfry.

'We don't know if we should ring it or not,' the monk said to me. 'We're afraid. Maybe it will offend the new authorities. So, we ring the bell ever so softly. It wouldn't even frighten a crow off the belfry it's so quiet. Do come in.'

We entered the church. No more than three or four candles were burning. Old men in black monastic

robes embroidered with white crosses and skulls stood motionless. Their narrow faces glowed like darkened gold in the half-light. There was the slightly bitter smell of burned juniper berries, which the monks used instead of incense.

Overwhelmed by it all, I felt my mind become a confused jumble of impressions and memories – this ancient monastery, the mournful chanting, the wind in the pines, the skulls on the robes, Moscow, the cross on Lëlya's grave, the lice-infested soldiers in the trenches, the synagogue in Kobrin, the lighthouse in Taganrog, meetings, revolution, 'La Marseillaise', Kerensky, 'Peace to the Huts, War on the Palaces!' The fantastic, patchwork course of my life seemed like some strange dream. The only constant in it had been the unending expectation of change.

How was I to make sense of it? Was there anything in this chaos I could use for some serious, constructive purpose? And how was I to explain to myself the fact that I could side with the revolution, support the most progressive ideas and love Heine while at the same time feeling completely at home here in this relic of medieval Russia, with the monks' quivering voices singing of man's hope for heaven's blessing, 'as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be'? And why is it whenever I hear those words I recall these lines – 'My grief lowers its string of fine pearls into the forged coffer . . .'[3] The lines from this poem seemed like some contemporary echo of the monks' chants. I left the monastery and struggled for a long time to make sense of all these things. After that, I liked to visit the monastery whenever I went to fish on the river Uzh. The monks treated me to old mead and cold water.

Newspapers never reached us, so I had to ride all the way to Chernobyl on a horse with a bad leg. I managed to do this only once and brought back with me to Kopan news of the Kornilov affair[4] and the fall of Riga to the Germans. Mama refused to let me go after that. A mysterious gang had appeared in the woods – either escaped Austrian prisoners of war or convicts released from jail. No one had actually seen the gang, but everyone was on edge.

Time passed. Nothing more had been heard of the gang for a long time, and things quietened down. At the end of the autumn I finally left for Kiev and from there for Moscow. Mama made me promise to return the following spring. By the time I left Polesia, the leaves had dried and turned yellow and the woods were wreathed in mist. A week after my departure, a gang descended on the monastery. The bandits tore up the cells looking for silver, shot all the monks and then set fire to the church. But the centuries had petrified its timber, so the church was only charred and did not burn to the ground.

[1] Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970), lawyer, member of the SRs, served as minister of justice, minister of war and then last prime minister of the Provisional Government.

[2] Nicholas Roerich (1873–1947), artist, writer, theosophist known for his paintings of Russia's distant past.

[3] Lines from a poem by Olga Belyaevskaya (active in the early 1900s), used by the Russian Symbolist Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) as an epigraph to his poem 'Under the Birch Tree' (1906).

[4] A failed military coup d'état led by General Lavr Kornilov against the Provisional Government in September 1917.

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Blue Torches

In Moscow I found lodgings in a two-storey house near Nikitsky Gate. It faced three streets: Tverskoy Boulevard, Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street and Leontievsky Lane. The fourth side of the house abutted the thick firewall of a six-storey block of flats. Across the road, at the corner of Tverskoy Boulevard (where the Timiryazev Monument now stands), was a long, plain building that housed a chemist's shop and had a cellar loaded with the shop's supplies. The windows of my room on the first floor looked out onto the chemist's. These details about the house and its location are necessary for making sense of the unusual events that were to come.

One autumn night, hazy with smoke and frost, I woke up with the strange sensation that all the air had suddenly been sucked out of my room. For a few seconds I thought I had gone deaf. I climbed out of bed. The floor was covered with shattered glass from the windows. The shards shone in the light of the misty moon drifting high in the sky over slumbering Moscow. The deathly quiet was broken by what sounded like a brief clap of thunder. Something flew past my windows with a loud screech followed immediately by a long, slow rumble as the corner of the house facing Nikitsky Gate collapsed. Children started crying in the landlord's flat.

At the time there was no way of knowing that a gun placed at the base of the Pushkin Monument was firing directly at Nikitsky Gate. This we were to learn only later. After this second shot the silence returned. The moon was still staring down attentively from the misty night sky at the broken glass on my floor. A few minutes later a machine-gun by Nikitsky Gate opened fire. That's how the October battle, or as we called it then the 'October coup', began in Moscow. It lasted for several days.

The machine-gun was answered by rifle fire. A bullet flew in through my window and straight into a portrait of Chekhov on the wall. The bullet hit Chekhov in the chest and tore a hole in his white piqué waistcoat. I later found the portrait buried under a heap of plaster. The crossfire crackled like burning brushwood. Bullets clattered on the metal rooftops. My landlord, an elderly widowed architect, called out to me to join him in some back rooms facing the courtyard. Two little girls and their old nanny were sitting on the floor. The woman had wrapped them up from head to toe in a thick shawl.

'We're safe here,' said the landlord. 'It's not likely the bullets can pierce the interior walls.'

The older of the girls asked from under her shawl: 'Papa, are the Germans attacking Moscow?'

'No, that's no Germans.'

'But then who's shooting?'

'Be quiet!' her father snapped.

I went back to my room. Pressing myself against the wall, I peered out at an angle through the window. Black clouds had covered up the moon. With their lights out, the neighbouring buildings were almost invisible in the darkness. The gunfire raged without stopping, and the bullets sang with their own individual notes – some whistled lightly, some whined, others made a strange screeching sound as though they were turning somersaults in the air. I tried to make out people in the streets but the flashes from the guns were not bright enough. Judging by the gunfire, the Red Guards had begun their attack at Strastnaya Square and had now advanced to the summer restaurant (an ornate wooden pavilion) located about halfway down the boulevard. The Cadets were holding down their positions in the square beside Nikitsky Gate.[1]

All of a sudden, a tall blue tongue of flame shot up with a quiet roar, swaying in the wind under my windows. It looked like a torch. In its pale light I could now make out figures running from tree to tree in the streets below. Soon a second blue torch flared up on the opposite side of the boulevard. Bullets had shattered the burners of the street lamps, and the burning gas was now rushing straight out of the pipes. By its fluttering light the gunfire immediately increased. I went back to my landlord.

'Well?' he asked.

'We've got to get the children out of here,' I said.

'But where to? There's shooting up and down Tverskoy Boulevard.'

'Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street. We can get there through the shops.'

'The Red Guards have set up machine-guns on Malaya Nikitskaya Street and they're firing all along

Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street. They're also directing their guns at the Cadets' headquarters in the Union Cinema.'

'Then that leaves Leontievsky Lane.'

'Let's go and have a look.'

We went down the back stairs into the courtyard. Bullets whistled high overhead. Here and there bits of cornice exploded and rained down into the yard. A few people were standing around next to the small porter's lodge in a far corner. The shooting in Leontievsky Lane turned out to be even more intense than on Tverskoy Boulevard. The firewall on the fourth side of our house loomed over the yard. It didn't have a single window. The architect looked at it and cursed.

'It's a trap,' he said. 'We're blocked in on all sides. There's no way out. We're doomed.'

It was getting light. The men by the lodge turned out to be employees of Bartel's Bakery, located on the building's ground floor. A bearded baker all white with flour – a veteran of Port Arthur – suggested moving all the tenants into the lodge as this was the safest location. The number of people was small since the entire ground floor was occupied by shops and stockrooms. And so began the first of many days we spent in the lodge.

One of the bakers, a young fellow, decided to go over to the Red Guards. Crouched down low, he ran out of the gate onto the pavement and was immediately mown down by machine-gun fire from Nikitsky Gate.

Sitting in the lodge, we talked about what had happened over the past few days and found ourselves amazed by our own stupidity. The fighting had taken us all by surprise. Nevertheless, we all knew about the uprising in Petrograd, the storming of the Winter Palace, the shot fired by the *Aurora*. We all knew that martial law had been declared in Moscow, that over on Khodynka Field well-armed units of Red Guards and soldiers had been massing, and that the Alexeevskoe and Alexandrovskoe military academies had been alerted for active duty.

The Port Arthur veteran took command of our building. A thin trickle of water still flowed from the tap in the lodge, and so he ordered us to collect every last jug and pail from every flat and fill them up. The water could be cut off at any moment. Next we collected all the bread and other remaining food. It wasn't very much. We didn't know what was going on outside, but were certain fighting was occurring all over Moscow. One thing was clear – we were in a state of siege. We found ourselves as though in a fortress ringed by fire. Our fortress, however, wasn't safe. Already by the end of the first day, bullets were flying into the courtyard. We sat out on the lodge's steps the entire first night, trying to determine by the sound of the gunfire which side was gaining the upper hand.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, the shooting stopped. We all froze. The silence seemed more threatening than the barrage of gunfire. It didn't last long. We heard distant voices in the pitch-darkness calling out: 'Message for the commander! The Cadets are manning the roofs!' The message was repeated, again and again, with growing urgency. As abruptly as it had stopped, the gunfire resumed, and again lead hail crackled against the drainpipes and shop signs. Towards evening on the second day the chemist's shop caught fire, sending up coloured flames – one minute yellow, then green, then blue – most likely from the various chemicals. Muffled explosions boomed in the cellars. Before long the whole building collapsed. The flames died down, but an acrid, rainbow-coloured cloud of smoke rose from the ruins for several days. The metal roof on our building began to buckle and the window frames smoked, but fortunately nothing caught fire. We choked on the smoke, our eyes burned with tears. The wet kerchiefs we tied to our faces provided little relief. On the third night there was another lull in the shooting, and we heard someone shouting on the boulevard in a strained and uncertain voice: 'Vikzhel (that was the abbreviated name at the time for the All-Russian Union of Railway Workers) calls on all sides to cease fire and send delegates! To negotiate a truce! Don't shoot! A representative of Vikzhel shall act as the mediator. He'll wait ten minutes. Don't shoot!'

An unbelievable silence followed. It was so quiet we could hear the bullet-ridden shop signs groaning in the wind. I looked at my watch in the dull glow of the smouldering chemist's shop. Everyone followed along in silence as the second hand moved around my watch face, faster, it seemed, than normal. Five minutes! Seven minutes! Are the Cadets really not going to surrender? Ten minutes!

A single shot rang out, followed by another, and then all sides began firing at once like a swirling tornado. Cannon fire could now be heard coming from the direction of Arbatskaya Square. Something crashed in the neighbouring house behind the firewall. A column of fire slowly rose over the roofline. We later learned the Cadets had shelled the house and set it on fire to keep it from falling into the hands of the Red Guards. The building, in military jargon, commanded the whole neighbourhood. This second fire was more dangerous than the one at the chemist's. Burning timber and pieces of red-hot metal from the melting roof came crashing down on us in the yard. We hurried to put them out with what little water

we still had left. The old baker assured us that we would be safe once the building's top floor burned away, assuming, of course, the firewall didn't collapse. We agreed with him even though we knew the situation was grim.

That same night, as if by some miracle, a man climbed through a broken ground-floor window along Tverskoy Boulevard and made his way into our yard, now so brightly lit by the fire that every fleck of dirt could be seen on the stone paving. Wearing a grey jacket and a soldier's belt, a Mauser on his side, he had a light brown beard and spectacles and looked a bit like Dobrolyubov.[2]

'Quiet!' he yelled. 'All the tenants over here! We've made a deal with the Cadets to hold our fire so that we can evacuate all the women and children. But only the women and children! They won't let the men leave. I'll admit, you're in an awful bind. The house is going to go up in flames any minute now, so I'd take my chances and try to run for it, if I were you. But that's only after we take the women and children out. Leave by way of Tverskoy Boulevard and then cross over to Bronnaya Street. Single file, one at a time. Line up by the gate.'

The man disappeared as quickly as he had come.

We all gathered at the gate. The shooting stopped. The first to hurry across the boulevard were the old nanny and the two little girls. The rest of the women followed. While they were running the Red Guards and Cadets began shouting at each other.

'Hey, you snivelling little brats, stop fooling around and drop your weapons!' shouted the Red Guards.

'We swore an oath!' the Cadets yelled back.

'To whom? Kerensky? That son of a bitch has already turned tail and bolted to the Germans.'

'Not to Kerensky – to Russia!'

'We are Russia!' the guards shouted. 'Use your brains!'

As soon as the women had made it across, the old baker rushed out of the gate. I was to go next, but just then a burst of machine-gun fire from the Cadets' side ripped off a corner of the gate. The baker turned and threw himself back inside. The crossfire started up again and chunks of broken brick, glass and wood showered the pavement. We returned to the porter's lodge. The baker cursed and then said to me: 'If only we'd got out. You and I would have gone over to the Red Guards. You're just a student, but they'd have taken you since you're with me. Look at it any way you like, there's just one Russia. And that's our Russia. Theirs already has one foot in the grave.'

I thought of the Red Guards yelling 'We are Russia!' and suddenly, with an incredible rush of clarity, I understood the meaning of the hackneyed words 'the mass of the people'. I belonged to that 'mass of the people'. I felt at home among those craftsmen, peasants, workers, soldiers, among that great, enormous world of simple folk which had produced Gleb Uspensky, Leskov, Nikitin, Gorky and thousands of others like them.[3]

'Well,' I said to the baker, 'there's no life for me apart from my people. That I know.'

'Exactly,' said the baker, grinning. 'Stick with us, my friend. You don't want to get left behind.'

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The food ran out on the fifth day. Famished, we stuck it out until the evening. Behind the wall of the lodge the neighbouring house was burning itself out. There was a small food shop in our building. We had no other choice than to break in. The back door opened onto the courtyard. The baker snapped off the lock with an axe, and we took turns that night running in and grabbing as much sausage, tinned food and cheese as we could carry. The glow from the fire was so bright we had to hide behind the counters to stay out of sight of the Cadets at the Union Cinema. We didn't want to give them any excuses to shoot.

The first night went well, but the second night a Red Guard sniper set himself up in the turret of the corner building on Bronnaya Street. From there he had a clear view into the courtyard, still lit up by the fire next door, and so he sat, puffing a cigarette, and taking pot shots at anyone who ventured out into the yard.

It was my turn. I managed to dash into the shop – either the sniper didn't see me or he didn't manage to get a shot off. I can still remember the place. Smoked sausages wrapped in silver paper hung from a stretched wire. Round, red cheeses on the counter-top were smothered in horseradish from bullet-ridden jars. Sharp-smelling puddles of vinegar, cognac and various liqueurs oozed over the floor. Firm, white marinated mushrooms covered with a reddish film floated in the puddles. The large earthenware jar that had held the mushrooms lay in shattered pieces.

I quickly tore off several sausages and stacked them like logs in one arm, and put a large wheel of Swiss cheese on top, along with a few tins. As I was running back across the yard something pinged under my arms, but I didn't pay any attention. Once inside the lodge, the only woman still with us, the porter's wife, pale and sickly, let out a terrible scream. I dropped everything and saw that both my arms

were bleeding. A minute later, despite our desperate circumstances, everyone was laughing as they helped to wash the thick tomato purée off me. The sniper had missed me, and fortunately only the tin of tomatoes, the contents of which I was now covered in, had been hit.

The bread was gone, so we ate the sharp cheese together with sausage and tinned peppers and washed it all down with cold tap water. The landlord remembered he had a bag of rusks back in his kitchen, and I offered to go and fetch it. I carefully picked my way up the back stairs, which were now littered with broken bricks. In the kitchen water poured from a bullet hole in the pipe, and the floor was deep in sticky, sodden plaster. I began rummaging around in the cupboard for the bag when I heard shouts and the pounding of feet coming from the boulevard. I went back to my room to see what was happening. Red Guards with their rifles at the ready were running in pairs along the street. The Cadets were retreating without firing a shot. I had never seen fighting at such close quarters before, right under my windows. I was struck by the men's faces – green and hollow-eyed. Deafened by their own shouting, the men seemed to be in the grips of a blind rage. I heard the pounding of boots running up the main stairs and pulled myself away from the window. The door from the stair landing flew open and smashed against the wall. Bits of plaster fell from the ceiling. An excited voice yelled out from the landing: 'Mityukha, bring the machine-gun!'

I turned. An old man in a fur hat with ear flaps and a bandolier across his shoulder stood in the doorway. He was holding a rifle. He stared at me for an instant with wild eyes and then pointed his gun at me and shouted: 'Don't move! Hands up!'

I raised my hands.

'What've you got there, Grandpa?' came a young voice from the hallway.

'I've got one of 'em,' the old man said. 'He was shooting. From the window up here, shooting us in the back, the bastard!'

Only now did I realise that I was wearing my shabby student uniform. Just then it hit me that, according to the baker, a student militia on the side of the Provisional Government had been fighting at Nikitsky Gate. A young worker walked into the room. He had on a cap pulled down tightly over his ears. He strode over to me, casually took hold of my right hand, and examined my palm. 'Look here, Grandpa, he wasn't shooting,' he said. 'No marks on his hand from the bolt. It's perfectly clean.'

'You damned fool!' yelled the old man in the hat. 'What if he'd been shooting with a pistol and not a rifle? There wouldn't be any marks. He could've tossed the pistol somewhere. Take him to the yard!'

'Anything's possible,' the young worker replied and slapped me on the shoulder. 'All right, let's go, and don't try anything stupid.'

I don't know why, but I didn't say a word the entire time. Maybe because the situation seemed so hopeless there was no point in trying to explain. I had been caught standing next to a broken window on the first floor in a house just captured by the Red Guards. I was wearing a student uniform smeared with plaster and covered with dark stains that looked more like blood than tomato purée. No matter what I might have said, no one would have believed me. And so, I said nothing, recognising, of course, that my silence was one more damning piece of evidence against me.

'Crazy devil!' said the old man. 'It's obvious he's a real fanatic.'

The young Red Guardsman marched me out into the yard. I felt the hard barrel of his rifle in my back as I walked. The yard was now full of Red Guards. They were pulling crates out of a demolished warehouse and using them to build a barricade across Tverskoy Boulevard.

'What's going on? Who's this?' they asked, gathering around me.

The old man in the hat said I had been shooting at them from a window.

'Off with him, straight to the Good Lord's general staff !' a youth with drunken eyes said merrily.

'Fetch the commander?'

'He's not here.'

'Where is he?'

'We had an order not to harm any prisoners!'

'Sure, prisoners, but he was shooting us in the back.'

'Then there's only one thing to do – shoot him right here on the spot.'

'Comrades, we can't do anything without the commander.'

'What, some sort of lawyer, are you? Up against the wall with him!'

They dragged me over to the wall. The porter's wife came rushing out and threw herself at the Red Guards, grasping at their arms. 'My sons, comrades,' she pleaded, 'he lives here with us. He didn't shoot at you. I'm a sick woman, better to kill me and let him be.'

'Now, now, Mother, don't go feeling sorry for people without knowing all the facts,' said the old man in the hat. 'We're not a gang of murderers. Go on now, leave us alone.'

I still don't understand why, as I stood against the wall and heard the click of the rifle bolts, I didn't feel a thing. Maybe I went numb inside or even lost consciousness for a moment. I don't know. I just stood there staring at the corner of the gatepost, damaged by a burst of machine-gun fire, thinking about nothing at all. Yet for some reason I remember the tiniest details about that post. I remember there were seven deep pits where it had been grazed by bullets. The pits were white (the upper layer of plaster) on top and red farther down (exposed brick). I remember the broken, white-painted bracket of the porter's bell, a piece of electrical wiring dangling from the bracket, and a drawing in charcoal on the wall of a face with an enormous nose and a few straggly hairs. 'We sure made a fool out of him!' was scrawled beneath it. It seemed as though time had stopped, and I was trapped in some universal silence. In fact, only a few seconds must have passed before I heard a man shout: 'What the hell are you doing? Have you forgotten your orders? Put down those rifles!'

The man's voice was at once unfamiliar and yet quite familiar. With difficulty I looked up from the gatepost – my neck hurt terribly – and saw the man with the Mauser who had reminded me of Dobrolyubov, the very man who had come the other night to evacuate the women and children. He was pale now and didn't look at me.

'Stop it!' he said sharply. 'I know this man. He's not part of the student militia. The Cadets are attacking, and you're fooling around with this nonsense.'

The old man in the hat grabbed me by the collar and started shaking me. 'God damn you!' he snarled. 'I nearly had you on my conscience, you fool. Why didn't you say anything? And you a student!'

The young worker rapped me playfully on the shoulder and winked. 'Beat it, and good luck!'

A Cadet hand-grenade exploded in the street. The Red Guards ran out from behind the barricade and into the boulevard. The house emptied. Once again, the machine-guns rattled with terrifying intensity. I never did learn the name of the young commander with the Mauser who had saved the women and children and me as well. I never saw him again, although I know I could have picked him out of a crowd.

On the fifth night of the 'Nikitsky siege', all of us – unshaven, our voices hoarse from the cold – sat out on the porter's steps as we did every night, trying to guess when the fighting would finally stop. It didn't seem to be in any hurry. The fighting had yet to acquire the intense bitterness that would come later during the civil war. The Red Guards were fighting a 'war of attrition', confident of victory, knowing that the Cadets would soon lose their nerve and give up. The new Soviet government had seized power in Petrograd. Bit by bit the country was abandoning the Provisional Government. The Cadets in Moscow knew this. Their cause was lost. The bullets whistling through the air around the house at Nikitsky Gate were their last.

We sat talking about the fate of the Cadets and the Provisional Government. The late-night air smelled of smoke from the burning houses. Only in the direction of Kievsky station was the sky still a dull crimson. From Khodynka to the north came the whining sound of an artillery shell. It flew over Moscow and exploded somewhere near the Kremlin. Just then, as if on command, the shooting stopped. Apparently, the Red Guards and Cadets were listening and waiting for the second explosion to learn the artillery's target. And finally it came – a second whining noise flew through the air followed by the flash of an explosion by the Kremlin.

'Are they really firing on the Kremlin?' whispered the old baker.

The architect sat up. 'I don't believe it!' he shouted. 'That's impossible! No one would ever dare raise their hand against the Kremlin.'

'You're right, no one would dare,' the baker agreed quietly. 'It must just be a warning. Let's listen.'

We sat, frozen in place, waiting for more shots. An hour passed. Nothing. Then two hours. All was quiet. A thin light began to seep along the eastern edge of the sky, the chilly light of dawn. It was unusually quiet in Moscow, so quiet we could hear the burning hiss of the gas torches along the boulevard.

'Seems like it's all over,' said the baker. 'We should go and have a look.'

We carefully stepped out onto Tverskoy Boulevard. Lime trees, their branches broken, loomed in the grey hoar-frost and smoke. Along the boulevard all the way to the Pushkin Monument, the broken street lamps blazed like funeral torches. Torn cables covered the ground. They buzzed angrily, twisting this way and that and catching against the cobbles. A dead horse, its yellow teeth bared, lay across the tramlines. A long trickle of frozen blood stretched over the paving stones by our gate. Riddled with bullet holes from the machine-gun fire, the houses kept dropping sharp splinters of glass that fell all around us.

Filling the boulevard from one side to the other, columns of exhausted, silent Red Guards were walking towards Nikitsky Gate. Their red armbands had been twisted into string. Almost every one of them was smoking, and the light at the ends of their cigarettes flashed, creating the effect of a silent gun battle. A white flag had been hung from a lamp-post in front of the Union Cinema. Nearby against one of

the façades stood a row of Cadets in crumpled forage caps and greatcoats smeared with bits of grey plaster. Many of them were half asleep, leaning on their rifles.

An unarmed man in a leather jacket went up to the Cadets. Several Red Guards stood waiting behind him. The man in the leather jacket raised an arm and said something to the Cadets in a low voice. A tall officer stepped forward. He removed his sword and his revolver, threw them down at the feet of the man in the leather jacket, saluted, turned and then walked away slowly on unsteady feet in the direction of Arbatskaya Square.

Next, all the Cadets, one by one, approached the man in the leather jacket and laid down their rifles and ammunition. And then, with the same slow, tired footsteps as their officer, they walked off down Nikitsky Boulevard towards the Arbat. As they walked some of the Cadets tore off their epaulettes. The Red Guards watched the Cadets go. Their faces were creased with tension, their eyes were stern, but no one said a word. It was all over. From the direction of Tverskaya Street, through the chilly darkness, came the crash of cymbals, the blare of brass horns and the sound of voices singing:

> Our deliverance we'll receive from no one –
> Not God, Tsar, or Hero of another land.
> We alone shall win our freedom,
> By ourselves and with our own hand.

[1] In November, a few hundred cadets (also known as Iunkers) from local military academies took to the streets to resist the Bolshevik seizure of power in Moscow.

[2] Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836–61), poet, literary critic and fierce opponent of tsarist autocracy.

[3] Gleb Uspensky (1843–1902), writer who explored themes of the peasantry and working class; Nikolai Leskov (1831–95), highly esteemed writer of many works including *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; Ivan Nikitin (1824–61), poet, largely of the Russian landscape and peasant life.

72

The Journalists' Café

The year 1918 began with a thaw, dirty snow and a sky so over-cast and heavy that upon making contact with the impenetrable clouds the smoke from the factory chimneys spread out in thick coils. The Moscow streets still smelled of printers' ink, and tattered scraps of old newspapers and posters clung to the walls. The decrees of the Soviet government had been pasted over them, but they showed through this layer of dull, cheap paper. Day by day, with an inexorable logic, these harsh, pitiless decrees demolished the foundations of the old world, hurled them aside and proclaimed the principles of a new life. It was difficult to imagine what this life would be like. The change to our basic understanding of things had happened so unexpectedly that at times everyday life lost its sense of reality and became as fluid as quicksand. A chill gripped one's heart. The weak in spirit reeled like drunkards.

My room by Nikitsky Gate had been destroyed by the shelling. So I moved into a dreary brick wing of a house on Granatny Lane, next door to the house where I had been born twenty-five years before. The landlady was a morose widow who let rooms to students. My neighbour was a freckled student named Lipochka. She was the daughter of a village teacher, and her relatives and friends often came to visit from the country near Ryazan. They brought with them the aroma of apples, homespun and frost. For some reason I found the apples' strong smell and the homespun's suggestion of warmth and durability comforting.

I asked them about life in the country. They sighed, hesitated and then whispered that no one really knew what was happening. It was as though a large wave had washed through the village, but what would come next was anyone's guess. Maybe the wave had brought a thick new layer of topsoil, or maybe it had washed away all the seed. That's how things were in the village – a mix of terror and joy. The main thing was that the peasants had finally taken the land for themselves, and no one would ever take it back.

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Since my return from Kopan in September I had been working as a reporter for the newspaper the *People's Power*. It was one of those newspapers with a short life. A great many of them had sprung up in those days. Before long they were all quickly liquidated.

The paper was published by the Popular Socialist Party, the so-called NS. Some of its contributors lacked a clear understanding of the party's rather vague programme. All we knew for certain was that the paper was run by quite cultured and educated people, imbued with liberal impulses which they would not be able to follow through on. At the top was an attractive and imposing older 'NSer' by the name of Yekaterina Kuskova. She spoke in a deep Gypsy voice and looked down condescendingly on us reporters, especially after someone wrote some unkind words in indelible pencil on her office door:

> Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Little cuckoo bird,
> You've been cuckooing far too long.
> O Madame Kuskova, you must've heard
> That the past's both dead and gone.

The newspaper's editors did not demand any tendentiousness from us reporters – that was provided by the head writers and better-known journalists. I was utterly consumed by my sleepless life as a newspaper reporter, crowded with events – large and small, with scandals, arguments, mass demonstrations, marches and gun battles. The sharp air of that revolutionary winter went to our heads. Our hearts glowed with a woolly romanticism. I could not resist it, nor did I want to. Our faith in universal happiness shone like an undying light over the chaos of our lives. That happiness was sure to come. We naïvely believed that our wish to be its creators and witnesses was enough to guarantee its arrival.

We searched for universal truths in everything we read. We sought in the events taking place around us echoes of past eras. The French Revolution, the Decembrist uprising, the Paris Commune, the

revolution of 1905 – all cast their shadow on contemporary reality, making it still more vivid and exciting. Whatever its internal contradictions, even the poetry of Verhaeren (which I was in love with at the time) burned with an old revolutionary flame:

> To the square with the guillotine's blade,
> To the streets ringing with the tocsin's savage cry,
> Our mad dreams fly!

All the confusion and fever of the day was justified given our youth and hunger to hurry the arrival of the new order. Everything that I had learned as a result of my restless youth, particularly from my experiences in the war, I forgot. The recent events had somehow transported me back ten years to a time when I was still in thrall to my unripe and childish notions. It seemed to me as though I had grown stupid. I could feel no ground under my feet. I was embarrassed and at times angry at my inability to find a consistent attitude to what was happening around me. At times it struck me as wonderful and praiseworthy and then as wrong, one minute great and mighty, the next a parody of greatness to justify unnecessary cruelty, one moment radiant with promise, the next as dark and terrible as a stormy sky.

Only one thing was clear – life had settled its accounts with the past and was racing towards a new shore, one which had to secure, of course, freedom and justice and to lift up the people to undreamed-of heights and provide the means to develop all their talents. For me the ultimate point of the revolution was that it would gather together the finest things life and culture had to offer in order to raise the human spirit. I was told that this was not the goal of the revolution but its result. But I believed that the result must be the goal and that this truth could not be denied.

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Of all the NSers who worked in the newspaper's editorial office, Mikhail Osorgin was the only one we young reporters made friends with. He had returned from abroad and was completely overwhelmed by the situation in Russia, which left him all at sea. It even showed in the expression of his bright, anxious eyes. He was kind and ingratiating with everyone, and he believed everything everyone told him. Despite Osorgin's best efforts to hide it, his appearance and even his weary voice betrayed a deep sadness. He longed for Italy, where he had spent many years. Back in Russia, he always seemed to be only half awake. We sometimes tried to convince him to return to Italy, telling him there was nothing for him to do here and that there he could at least write his unpretentious stories. He would say in a guilty voice: 'You've got to understand, I'm a Russian and I love Russia so much that it breaks my heart. But I don't recognise her anymore. Sometimes I think: this can't be possible, is this really Russia I see here before me? Even the intonation in people's voices has changed. It doesn't sound like Russian anymore. Clearly, there's no hope for me.'

Osorgin was especially at a loss whenever old Gilyarovsky, the ubiquitous 'king of reporters', burst into the office, drowning out everything and everyone with his hoarse, thundering voice and his smoker's hack.

'Novices!' he roared at us young reporters. 'NSers! Rotten liberals! You don't know a thing more about the Russian people than that fool Madame Kuskova with her '*Je ne vais pas*' and her '*Je ne sais pas*'! A newspaper has to breathe fire. It has to be too hot to hold in your hands. It has to make the reader gasp for breath. And what does your rag do? It mumbles. You ought to be writing novellas about anaemic young women. I know the Russian people. Just you wait – they're gonna give you hell!'

Osorgin smiled guiltily, and an angry Kuskova slammed her office door. Gilyarovsky nodded at her office and said in a carefully articulated whisper: 'Of course, it's possible for a lady to play politics on her little spider's legs from inside her office. And, yes, she can even shed tears over the articles she writes about the hardy Russian peasant. But just one true word from a real peasant and you'd all have fits. The same thing goes for the populists! Farewell! We'll talk more another time, but I can't say I care to sit around here any longer gabbing with the likes of you.' He left, but a tense silence hung in the air for some time, for fear the old man might return.

We young reporters loved Gilyarovsky for his showy gifts, his inexhaustible imagination and his old man's despair, and he loved us, in his own mocking way. From the *People's Power* he usually wandered off to another nearby editorial office, where, depending on the circumstances, he would launch into another round of attacks, or collect the latest news, or regale his audience with stories about Chekhov, Kuprin, Chaliapin or General Skobelev.

Whenever we ran into each other, he fixed me with his indignant round eyes and said: 'It's time you changed your type, young man, from Brevier to Bourgeois, and then to bold. Eight-point Brevier is for

newspapers, nine-point Bourgeois for poetry, and bold, that's for prose. So, strap yourself to that chair of yours and get to work.'

The grey-moustachioed old man in his Cossack jacket and astrakhan hat was Russian expansiveness, wit, cunning and goodness personified. Journalist, poet and writer, he was also an art lover and a famously generous Moscow host. He overflowed with jokes, stories, gags and improvisations, and without all his fooling around he would have withered away. This stentorian old man was at bottom a child. He loved, for example, to post letters to non-existent addresses in various exotic-sounding countries – Australia or the Republic of Costa Rica. These letters always came back to Moscow marked 'undeliverable' in some foreign language and covered with bright stamps and seals. He examined each one carefully. He even sniffed the envelopes, thinking he might pick up the sweet scent of tropical fruit, but they only smelled of leather and sealing wax. Who knows, perhaps these letters were a pitiful substitute for his dreams of travelling the world – having a good laugh with the coachmen of Paris and African kings along the banks of the Zambezi, treating them all to a pinch of his snuff – and then returning home with such remarkable tales that everyone in old Moscow would sit up and listen.

Gilyarovsky greeted the revolution as the most tremendous of news stories and an expression of the Russian spirit of revolt. He sought its origins in Stenka Razin and Pugachëv, in peasant uprisings, in 'red cocks' and other examples of rebelliousness.[1] He knew the life of Moscow like no one else, especially its hidden side that kept out of sight of the Soviet authorities: the Gypsy nightclubs at Pokrovskoe-Streshnevo, the sectarian chapels around Rogozhskaya Zastava, the gambling dens on Brestskaya Street and the howling mobs of aesthetes who met at the home of Pertsov near the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The leader here was a certain poet with a lisp and the long, soft hair of a child. He wore a smoking jacket and a monocle and was so frail you didn't dare shake his hand for fear that his pale, transparent fingers might be left in yours as a relic.

The times were still quite unsettled. They threw together a great many unlikely and incompatible people, most of whom one had never noticed before. The revolution had flushed them out of their corners, as though it had shaken a large barrel of stagnant water and suddenly all sorts of sand, leaves, twigs, beetles and grubs rose from the depths and up to the surface, where they swirled round and round on the eddy, bumping and colliding, finally sinking once again and settling on the bottom.

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In those early days of the revolution a lot of interesting people gathered in what was known as the Journalists' Café on Stoleshnikov Lane. A group of journalists had pooled their resources and rented an empty second-floor flat, which they filled with little tables and chairs in the style of a café. Here, we passed many cheerful long nights in its smoke-filled rooms. Here you could meet Andrei Bely, the Menshevik Martov, Bryusov and Balmont, the blind leader of the Moscow anarchists Chërny, the writer Shmelëv, the actress Roxanova – Chekhov's first 'Seagull',[2] Maximilian Voloshin, Potapenko, and journalists and writers of all ages, views and characters. The kind-hearted poet Agnivtsev[3] would always be there singing his simple little songs and sporting his usual enormous yellow tie wrapped around his long neck like a bandage and his baggy checked trousers covered with cigarette burns.

Coffee steamed in enamel mugs. It was as bitter as quinine; no amount of saccharine could sweeten it. Furious arguments broke out here and there, occasionally interrupted by the piercing crack of a slap in the face. Most often the face being slapped belonged to a handsome journalist with a dyed beard and a poisonous tongue. He hissed like a snake and poured his lethal venom over everything and everyone without exception. These slaps presented a fire hazard because the man with the dyed beard always had a lit pipe in his mouth. With every whack to the cheek, this pipe flew out of his mouth and spiralled over our heads like a firework, raining burning tobacco hither and thither. Immediately the stench of scorched wool filled the air. Everyone hurried to douse their smouldering jackets, trousers and tablecloths. The journalist with the dyed beard nonchalantly picked up his pipe from the floor, refilled and relit it, and walked out, being sure to announce to everyone present that he intended to report this outrage to a comrades' court.

'Go to hell!' the others shouted. 'Report it to the Revolutionary Tribunal if you want! Just get lost. We're sick and tired of you! Damn provocateur!'

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One day Maximilian Voloshin, the red-bearded, solidly built and short-sighted poet, came by and invited all of us to his lecture on poetry in the Hermitage Garden Theatre. Only a few people went. The others, bent over the café's rickety tables, couldn't tear themselves away from their heated political arguments.

I decided to go to the Hermitage. It was the end of March. The garden was dark and quiet. Melting snow slid from the trees. I caught the smell of rotting leaves, like the faint bouquet of wine, of bitter vegetable matter and last year's thawed-out flowers, which seemed to be seeping out from deep down inside the damp, shelterless and long-untended soil. Nature had been forgotten in those days. We were busy with other things. Words rang out over the country – rejoicing, denouncing and exposing. Words called people to arms, words threatened one's enemies. These words, as if some magnetic field, attracted millions of people. They summoned them both to destroy and to construct.

It was a time of sudden decisions and turbulence, not one for nature. Nevertheless, the wind still rustled as before in the deserted woods, and the frozen rivers turned from white to blue, filling with water. The same spiky hoar-frost covered the lime trees along the boulevards on those gloomy Moscow mornings. The sun set dutifully as always, and at night the stars shone timidly as though they understood that no one, not even astronomers and poets, gave them any thought. Everyone was besieged by their own mental storm. No one gave the natural world a second look, and if they did then with preoccupied, unseeing eyes.

People had been seized by different joys and passions. Even love, simple and unconditional as sunlight and air, gave way now and then before the torrent of events and was experienced as an attack of sentimentality requiring a cure. Loyalty to one's duty required the rejection of all misplaced, or possibly even dangerous, movements of the heart. There would be time again for such matters, but only in some distant future. The ongoing gigantic upheaval claimed all our strength. Not an ounce of it could be wasted. Wasted? To sacrifice love was, of course, heroic, but also unreasonable, especially if the ones doing it knew what they were giving up.

Whatever I stopped to think about in those days – be it love, poetry or the meaning of the events happening around me – I found that I was unable to form any proper judgement. I longed for some clear sense of values, for without it, I found it hard to go on. Before long, however, I realised that it was too soon for this. My time would come, but later. For now, life was too chaotic, and I had no choice but to wait for the outlines of the new order to emerge from the chaos.

Voloshin's lecture only added to the confusion. The theatre was practically empty. It was so cold inside my hands nearly froze. A few dusty electric lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling flickered off and on. A brown fog hung in the air. Voloshin seemed to be talking to himself, as though he had forgotten about the audience. He spoke of the war, of the iron age that had taken over our world, and asked, in a tragic monotone as he peered out into the depths of the empty hall, what use were poets and artists to such pitiless times. In England they had hanged the best Irish poets. In France three hundred poets had died in the first days of the war. One French general, who considered himself a lover and connoisseur of poetry, had said: 'Let these rapturous young men lead the attack. Let them light a flame in the men who'll follow.'

Verhaeren had to deny the whole meaning of his life and was forced to learn to hate. Jules Lemaître,[4] shocked by the absurdities of war, fell ill and forgot how to read. He could no longer comprehend what the letters meant and had to be taught all over again from the beginning like a child. The frightful list of the war's crimes against art mounted. Voloshin's voice grew flatter as he spoke. What he said was right, but what was the solution? About this he was silent.

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There were many remarkable people among the café's regular patrons. They were all individuals, different in their own way, but together they made for a jeering and even ruthless tribe of journalists.

Only one of the patrons, Alexander Yakovlev, a young writer from the Volga town of Volsk, kept to himself. Yakovlev was an expert on peasant life, about which he wrote some magnificent articles. Everyone treated this shy and reserved man with respect, which he earned not only from his excellent writing, but also from his rare talent for travelling to the remotest regions of Russia and always managing to return unharmed despite the total collapse of the country's railways. These journeys were feats of daring and endurance. He risked his life nearly every time.

The demobilised army poured along the railways, leaving ruin and destruction in its wake. Everything in the carriages that could be broken, stripped and stolen had been broken, stripped and stolen. Even the rusty sheet-iron had been wrenched off the roofs. At the Sukharevka Market there was a lively trade in stolen wash-basins, mirrors and strips of bald red plush upholstery cut from the carriages' benches. Bandits and thieves, dressed up as soldiers, egged on the demobilised men to acts of excess. At the stations they broke all the windows and tore apart fences and sometimes even entire railway workers' huts for wood to stoke the engines. Even cemeteries were looted – first they stripped the wooden crosses from the graves to feed the boilers and then the soldiers ripped off the rusty tin wreaths of lilies and

roses and hung them on the trains as decoration. The wind rushing over these graveyard flowers made a mournful whistle.

The station officials scattered and hid long before a train full of demobilised soldiers shook the rails and burst into the station to the noise of bandit whoops and accordions and the clatter of machine-gun fire. The slightest delay of the train ended in savage retribution to any on-duty officials who had failed to run away. At the sound of the mob's cry of 'Get 'er movin', Gavrila!' the engine drivers quaked and the blood drained from their faces. Any plain civilian or government official who by some miracle had managed to board would usually be grabbed by the soldiers and thrown from the moving train.

Yakovlev had been thrown off three times but was somehow still alive. The most amazing thing was that Yakovlev returned from these life-threatening journeys refreshed, excited, full of the fascinating things he had seen and heard, and always insisting that no price was too high to pay for the material he had gathered. He made his way to the most moth-eaten, isolated little towns – Khvalynsk, Sarapul, Serdobsk – places so remote from Moscow that they had become almost mythical. It was difficult to believe they even existed.

It seemed as though Russia had gone back in time to the appanage period of small independent principalities, cut off by the lack of roads and the breakdown of the post and telegraph, by dense forests, marshes and demolished bridges, and by distances that had grown immeasurably longer overnight. In these forgotten corners of the country, home-grown republics were proclaimed, each with its own crudely printed currency (although typically postage stamps, not banknotes, were traded as money). All this was jumbled together with remnants of the past – balsam in the window boxes, the ringing of church bells, prayer services, wedding feasts celebrated to the accompaniment of drunken salvoes from sawn-off shotguns, fields heavy with grain or bitter yellow winter cress, and talk about the end of the world when nothing of Russia would be left but 'the black of night and three pillars of smoke'. Yakovlev described all this in a leisurely manner, with taste, enjoyment and the skill of a saddler stitching a saddle girth with a coloured length of sturdy waxed thread. Our paths crossed from time to time over the years, and I was always impressed by his essential good-naturedness and his love of the simple Russian people. Characteristically, his dying wish was to be buried not in Moscow, but on the banks of the Volga in his hometown of Volsk.

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Every so often a small, nondescript man in a soft hat with a drooping brim called in at the café. It seems he had worked for a time for a newspaper in either Tula or Orël. Once he was involved in an amusing, and barely believable, incident with Mikhail Prishvin that the latter loved to tell.[5]

Prishvin was moving from Yelets to Moscow. At that time anti-profiteer detachments of lawless sailors from the Baltic fleet controlled the railway junctions. Prishvin had sewn all his things, including his manuscripts and notebooks, into several sacks and dragged them onto the train with him. At a junction near Orël, a detachment of sailors took his sacks, despite his protests and appeals. Prishvin jumped from the train and ran off to find the commanding officer in the station. This turned out to be a broad-faced sailor with a Mauser on his belt and a pewter ring in one ear. He was shovelling salted fish into his mouth with a wooden spoon as though it were porridge and refused to listen to Prishvin.

'Typical *intelligènt*!' he said. 'One more squawk out of you and I'll arrest you for sabotage. I'm sure a revolutionary tribunal could dig up something on you if asked. So, my friend, get lost while you're still in one piece.'

Just then the man in the hat with the drooping brim walked into the station and, standing by the doors, said in a soft but clear voice: 'Give the citizen his things back at once.'

'And just who are you? I don't take orders from some little mouse in a hat.'

'I am Magalif,' the man said in the same soft, clear voice, never once taking his eyes off the sailor.

The sailor choked on his fish and stood up. 'I beg your pardon,' he said ingratiatingly. 'My lads must have slipped up somehow. Got carried away, I guess. Lobov!' he yelled. 'Give this citizen his things back! That's an order from an agent of the Magalif administration itself. Understand? Take them back to his compartment. On the double! Stealing from every last person, you fools. Use your heads!'

Out on the platform Prishvin started to thank the man, but he replied only that Prishvin ought to clearly write the word 'Ethnology' on all his sacks in indelible pencil. 'A Russian is always impressed by a word he doesn't know, especially if it's foreign. You do that and no one will touch your things. I swear to it.'

'Please excuse my ignorance,' Prishvin said, 'but what is this powerful organisation you are from, this Magalif, as you called it? Why is the mere mention of it enough to make the head of this detachment quake with fear?'

The man smiled guiltily. ‘It’s no organisation. It’s my surname,’ he said. ‘It’s uncommon, and so I find that sometimes it’s enough to do the trick.’

Prishvin roared with laughter. He followed Magalif’s advice and wrote the mysterious word ‘Ethnology’ on all his sacks. No one laid a finger on them after that. This happened about the time when all sorts of ridiculous abbreviated names and titles began to enter the language. It became a problem of catastrophic proportions. Within a few years there were so many of them that they threatened to turn the Russian language into something as inarticulate and pointless as Volapük.[6]

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Every evening the journalist and well-known Muscovite bibliophile Shchelkunov walked into the café, wiping the condensation off his thick glasses and blindly stumbling into the tables. He invariably carried with him heavy batches of books tied together with telephone flex. Shchelkunov removed his shabby, old-fashioned overcoat with its beaver collar and hung it carefully on a peg, whereupon the sound of desperate miaowing filled the café. Shchelkunov had a habit of picking up stray cats as he walked the streets, stuffing them into the pockets of his coat, and carrying them around with him all day until returning home late at night and handing them to his wife to feed.

He looked like a provincial doctor. His beard always seemed to be wet and unkempt, and his jacket hung on him like a sack from the weight of all the books and manuscripts he had stuffed in his pockets. There were still no fountain pens back then, so Shchelkunov always carried with him a bottle of Vanka-Vstanka ink and several goose quills. He couldn’t write with a pencil, and it seems I was the only one who understood this fact about him and never made fun of his goose quills. I had always found anything written in pencil to be messy and unfinished. I believed that a clear idea ought to be clearly written. If it were possible, I would write only with Indian ink on thick, heavy paper.

Shchelkunov liked to sit down at a table, carefully sharpen a quill with a razor blade, and then, breathing heavily, begin to write up his notes in a hand that befitted a pre-Petrine scribe. He wrote about rare books, the discovery of famous lost paintings, exhibitions, bibliographic news and other curiosities. He left home early every morning in the hunt for valuable books and news, and he would turn up in the most unexpected places around Moscow. His notebook was full of addresses for pious old widows, retired buyers for the city’s various bookshops, bookbinders, dealers and fences. These were his suppliers. Most of them lived on the outskirts of the city – Izmailovo, Cherkizovo, Kotly and beyond Presnya. He made sure to visit all these places, by tram whenever possible, but mostly on foot.

He had a sixth sense for books. He could sniff out a rare edition and track it down with the patience of a retriever. He was not the only bibliophile in Moscow, however. Well aware of his uncanny ability to uncover rarities, the other collectors and dealers watched his every move closely and often tried to intercept his prey. Thus, he was always having to cover his tracks in the hope of throwing his rivals off the scent. This cloak-and-dagger business lent Shchelkunov a certain conspiratorial air. Perhaps this is why he always spoke in a muffled whisper, his narrow Tatar eyes glinting suspiciously.

‘It appears’, he confessed in a voice so low I had to lean far over the table to hear, ‘that in the next few days I shall uncover the secret location of Ivan the Terrible’s long-lost library. God forbid Lunacharsky gets wind of this.[7] Don’t breathe a word!’

If anyone brought Shchelkunov a rare book for his opinion, he leafed through it, appeared to give it a sniff, twisted up his mouth and said: ‘It’s a well-known edition. You can pick one of these up any day of the week at the stalls by the Kitaigorod Wall. You’ve been had. I’m sorry. But if you like, I’d be happy to swap it with you for a first-edition copy of Chekhov’s *Motley Stories*? What do you mean, no?! A year from now you’ll be sorry. All right, then, fine! I’ll make it an Italian edition of Marco Polo. You’ll have it tomorrow.’

Without waiting for the unguarded owner’s consent, Shchelkunov tucked the rare edition into his fat briefcase, snapped the lock and, glancing around, waited for the perfect opportunity to slip out. As best I can remember, none of these simpletons ever managed to get their books back once they had been engulfed by Shchelkunov’s briefcase. It was useless to make a scene. At the first sign, Shchelkunov silently threw on his coat, lowered his head and charged out of the café like a bull. Nothing and no one was strong enough to stop him. Breathing heavily through his nose, he was obstinately silent and deaf to even the most terrible insults.

Once Shchelkunov invited me to come along with him to a doss house near Vindavsky station. He had learned that a self-taught poet from Tula was living there. The man was broke but still owned some valuable books and manuscripts that Shchelkunov hoped to wheedle out of him. We took the tram to the station but got off one stop early to be cautious. For some reason Shchelkunov was convinced that his eternal bibliographical enemies were onto him that day and were watching his every step in the hope of

beating him to the poet from Tula. All of a sudden, he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me behind a hoarding. We hid there for a moment, and Shchelkunov, struggling to catch his breath, said: 'Right there! It's a broker. Look, just there on the pavement opposite the doss house. The old man in the tattered panama hat and the billy-goat beard. This is why I brought you along. I need your help.'

'How can I help?'

'I'll duck into that chemist's shop, which will give me a good view of the house from the front window. I'll wait there. You've got to get rid of him. If he sees me go into the house, I'm done for. I've been searching for this damned poet for over two months.'

'How am I supposed to get rid of him?'

'Pretend you're a detective. That'll scare him off. He's got dirty hands. He once sold me books stolen from the Museum of History.'

Shchelkunov didn't give me a moment to think before slipping away to hide in the chemist's. There was nothing left for me to do but play my part. But how? I pulled my cap down over my eyes, thrust my hands into my pockets and sauntered over to the doss house. A few steps short of the old man in the panama, I stopped, leaned back against a fence and began to examine the house with exaggerated attention. It was an old, four-storey building with a crack in its façade that ran all the way from the roof to the cellar. A notice written in alternating blue and red pencil had been stuck to the outer door: 'All Callers Are Hereby Forewarned: Silence on all floors!'

The old man in the panama shot me a glance. I stood there, my expression impassive and perhaps, so I thought, even a bit insolent, and then looked down into my cupped hand and stared closely, as though surreptitiously comparing the man's face with a photograph. He turned abruptly and began to hurry away. But then he made a mistake: he pulled out his cigarette case and lit up. I followed, keeping a close eye on him. The obvious tension in his frightened, spindly back told me he was doing everything in his power not to break into a run. I caught up with him and asked in a polite tone: 'Could I have a light, citizen?'

With that, the old man let out a wild scream, jumped straight up in the air, and then, knees bent, scuttled away like a crab, ducking through a nearby gate and vanishing from sight. The whole scene was bizarre and mildly terrifying.

Meanwhile, a satisfied Shchelkunov was rubbing his pudgy hands. He had beaten the dealers and managed to buy a letter of Leo Tolstoy from the Tula poet. As for me, I was angry with Shchelkunov and after this stupid business decided not to have anything more to do with him. I thought that, like most book collectors, Shchelkunov never read any books and just wanted to collect them, regardless of what they were about. I was soon proved wrong, however.

One day at the Journalists' Café Shchelkunov gave a lecture on the history of books. It was less of a lecture, however, and more of a poem or even a rapturous encomium to books. Books, he said, are the sole repository of human thought and its only mode of transmission from century to century, from generation to generation. They preserve it through all time in its primordial freshness and its variations of tone and meaning, as though it were newly born. Although made by human hands, books have become part of the eternal, like space and time. Mortals have created something of immortal value. But in the commotion of our daily lives, we continually forget this.

We try to grasp the cadence of Homer's measured verses and a miracle happens right before our eyes – Homer's petrified, thousand-year-old shepherd's staff blossoms with the flowers of living poetry. Our first encounter with an idea, even one that has come down to us over an unthinkable measure of time, is always fresh and immediate. We, children of the twentieth century, experience the same shock of novelty that our distant ancestors once did. The centuries of the past have receded into an impenetrable fog, but human thought shines brightly through that fog like the bright blue star Vega, as if it had absorbed every last glimmer of light from the entire universe. And just as the 'black coalpits' of space cannot put out the light of this purest of stars, so none of history's epochs of ruin and destruction or the dark spaces of time have the power to destroy an idea embodied and preserved in all the hundreds, thousands and millions of manuscripts and books.

Shchelkunov was convinced that there were lost manuscripts waiting to be discovered, particularly in the ancient lands of the Bible. Their discovery would enrich humanity with lost philosophies and pearls of poetry. Recently, a city built by the Ptolemies had been discovered in the mountains of Sinai. It had lain hidden in the hot canyons of the desert. Every structure of this lost city was an architectural masterpiece. And if whole cities could be found, then why not scrolls and old books as well?

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After hearing about the lost cities of Arabia from Shchelkunov, I became interested in the East and its

poets. Shchelkunov gladly gave me books by Saadi, Omar Khayyam and Hafiz.[8] It may seem strange that at a time of revolution, of the breaking of all familiar concepts and ways of living, some people, along with just trying to survive such times, would find themselves drawn to the East, to poetry and to a great many other things. But, in fact, there was nothing particularly remarkable about this since the human mind's thirst for knowledge is stronger than might be expected. The harsh vigour of the revolution's first years was so powerful and stimulating that it touched all our thinking. It seemed obvious to me that the people of our era, all of us children of the revolution, must possess not only the high moral qualities that in earlier times had been attributes of no more than a few outstanding men and women, but also the spiritual riches of the past and of every country. I sought this enrichment wherever I could find it, including in Eastern poetry.

I was encouraged in my infatuation for the East by a journalist named Rozovsky, a lazy older man with a wavy auburn beard. He went about all winter in a long and once luxurious but now bedraggled episcopal fur coat, and, despite his Jewish origin, had the distinct appearance of an Orthodox priest. He spent all his free time in his room lounging on a battered old ottoman covered with a Turkoman rug and engrossed in books about the East. He was an expert in Islam, particularly the various Muslim sects. He was convinced that of all the sects, only the Persian Bahá'í led by Abdu'l-Bahá were truly revolutionary.[9] He believed that this sect would bring about the downfall of Islam and usher in a spiritual renaissance in the lands of the Middle East.

Before the revolution Rozovsky had been to Turkey and Persia to study these lands and their cultures first hand. He was a solitary, independent man who loved to travel. He lived for almost a year in Asia Minor, mostly in the ancient Turkish capital of Bursa. He had much to say about Turkey, but he did it in his own unique way. He never began with the main point of his story, but with little details, often irrelevant bits of information. But gradually, bit by bit, the details would build up into a fascinating story, and he told it in such a precise way that had you written down his words, they could have been published without changing a thing. But Rozovsky was so terribly lazy that he wrote little and published even less. As soon as he sat down at his desk to write, he was overcome by boredom, dropped his pen and went off to his newspaper or the Journalists' Café to find someone to chat with.

I recall Rozovsky's stories about the old wooden house where he lived in Bursa. He never began the story with a description of the house, but with an elaborate discourse on the distinctive smell of Turkish wooden houses. According to Rozovsky, they all smelled of the warm dust of rotting wood and of honey, particularly on hot, still afternoons when if you so much as touched the verandah railing it would singe your hand. The smell of dust was always mixed with a faint hint of dry roses. The smell of honey came from the surrounding olive gardens filled with wild roses. The flowers attracted swarms of honeybees which built their combs in the attics; the sweet aroma wafted throughout the house. Rozovsky first encountered the thick smell of dried roses and honey in Constantinople, when he was shown the gem-encrusted casket holding the green banner of the Prophet. The banner was wrapped in layers of rotting silk and sprinkled with dry rose petals.

Rozovsky helped me understand the meaning behind much of the obscure Arabic imagery in Bunin's poems about the East. Because of Bunin, Islam appeared to me as a religion of dreams, torpor and patience, like the mood he experienced upon reading the Qur'an:

> In the sultry hour when the unruffled mirage
> Melts the whole world into one great dream,
> My soul is carried away, beyond the edge of this sad world,
> Into the infinite brilliance of the gardens of the Jinns.
> There, beyond the mists, flows the river of rivers,
> There, the azure al-Kauthar streams,
> Promising all the earth, all tribes and nations
> Peace. Be patient, pray – and believe.

When I mentioned the passivity and torpor of Islam to Rozovsky, he said that was sheer nonsense. All religions could be militant or fanatical, he said, and especially Islam. All it took was to declare a holy war and raise the green banner of the Prophet for Islam to swoop down on the world like a devastating black simoom blowing out of the desert. I pictured that storm to myself – a low, whirling darkness, the cries of the mounted warriors and the flash of their bared swords like lightning over the dry sands.

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I cannot, of course, describe all the patrons of the Journalists' Café, even though they deserve it.

Nevertheless, it isn't possible to avoid mentioning one particular specimen of old Moscow, namely the chairman of the Society of Lovers of Canary Singing, the reporter Saveliev. This giggling old man was the main supplier of political gossip and rumour. He never got into any trouble over this because he talked through his nose in an unintelligible patter. Supreme concentration was necessary to even guess at what he was talking about.

His pockets were always stuffed with hard, sticky sweets that he passed out to us smokers. He pushed these sweets on us, insisting we have one, even though they always came out of his pockets with bits of lint, dirt and other rubbish stuck to them. As soon as we saw him coming, we rushed to put out our cigarettes in the hope of avoiding these sweets.

Saveliev's nickname was 'de Mortuis' because all he did at the newspaper was write obituaries. These always began in one of two ways, either 'Death has torn from our ranks' or 'Our society has suffered a grievous loss'. All of us were so tired of his obituaries that one of the paper's editors decided to liven things up – and to have some fun at Saveliev's expense – by inserting the words 'At long last' before the usual 'death has torn from our ranks'. A terrible scandal ensued. The editor was sacked, and everyone felt terrible about the whole episode, even though the obituary had been for some disagreeable old professor. Saveliev spent the entire day at his desk, blowing his nose.

'I've seen hundreds of people off into the next world,' he muttered, 'but I have never once sinned against their memory. It's not my place to judge. And I've never agreed to write even a single line about any scoundrels.'

Still drying his tears, Saveliev went to see the editor-in-chief and told him, although barely able to speak, that he could no longer work for a newspaper where such shameful things were possible. The editor's best efforts to get him to change his mind failed. Saveliev left the office for good, and it wasn't long before everyone at the paper began to miss his giggling and his silly way of talking and even his sticky sweets covered with pocket grit and fluff.

Saveliev died soon after. His obituary was indistinguishable from every other boring and unfeeling obituary: 'Death has torn from our ranks a humble worker in the newspaper field . . .' Et cetera, et cetera. He had been a bachelor, and the only living creature left behind in his small stuffy room was an old parrot. The bird hung upside down from its perch and giggled like its late owner and, from time to time, screamed wildly: 'Polly, want a candy?' The building's porter adopted the parrot, and thus were all Saveliev's outstanding accounts settled.

Always the last to burst into the café was the polite but noisy Oleg Leonidov, also known as the 'King of Scoops'. He purposely arrived late, just at the moment when the newspapers, damp with printers' ink, were rolling off the presses. By then Leonidov could safely share with the competing reporters all the scoops he had made that day without fear they might end up in any of the other papers. They all turned green with envy, but there was nothing to be done about it.

It was no use trying to follow him. He was too elusive. No one knew how or when he managed to worm his way into the innermost recesses of the new Soviet governmental departments and kindly, gently, with an ingratiating smile extract from them their most sensational stories. Nor could he be tricked or fooled. He was a master of those arts himself. Just once, during the war, did he fall for a fake story fed to him by an incautious Kievan journalist. Leonidov nearly got sacked, but his revenge was so complete that after that no one even dared to joke with Leonidov, much less make a fool of him.

On the surface, Leonidov's ploy looked quite simple. He sent the journalist in Kiev a cryptic telegram: 'IN DORPAT IN ODESSA TSARITSYN IN CRIMEA FEED OATS ONLY LAST.' It was wartime. The telegram came to the attention of the military censors, who deemed it a coded message. Espionage was suspected. The journalist was arrested.

No one knows how long he would have sat behind bars if one of the investigators hadn't hit upon the idea of combining the first letter of each word in the telegram in the hope of cracking the code. They read 'IDIOTIC FOOL'. The journalist was eventually freed, although utterly frightened, while Oleg Leonidov calmly strolled about Moscow, basking in his new reputation as a dangerous wit.

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The Journalists' Café closed down at the end of the summer of 1918 due to a lack of funds. We were all sad to see it go, and not just us reporters from the various newspapers, but writers and artists as well, everyone for whom this flat with its low ceiling and absurd pink wallpaper had been their club, a comfortable, inviting place where we could speak our minds.

I was especially fond of the club at twilight. Through the open windows, beyond the bell tower of the fire station and the pedestal where Skobelev's statue had recently stood, the warm glow of the sunset faded in the golden dusk. The noise of the city, or rather its soft hum (in those days there were few cars

and the trams went by rarely), gradually died away, and nothing but the popular sounds of the ‘Song of Warsaw’ could be heard in the distance.

More and more often at this hour it made my heart ache to recall that out there, beyond Brestsky station, beyond Khodynka Field, where the sun had slowly set, the dew was already covering the birch groves and the clear water was gurgling over the snags in the river outside Moscow. The cool river smelled of mud and rotting timber piles. The deserted dachas were dark, and the peonies, planted long ago, blossomed in solitude. Drops of dew fell from the roofs onto the glass tops of the boarded-up verandahs, and their rhythmic sound was all that could be heard in the thickening dusk. The parks and fields and woods, left for a while in peace, stood close to the agitated city of Moscow, listening drowsily to its excited rumble.

[1] Cossack Stenka Razin (1630–71) led a major rebellion against tsarist Russia; Yemelyan Pugachëv (1742–75), ataman of the Yaik Cossacks, waged a bloody insurrection in the reign of Catherine the Great; ‘releasing the red cock’ is a peasant term for arson.

[2] Andrei Bely (1880–1934), poet and novelist, best known for his Symbolist novel *Petersburg*; Lev Chërny (1878–1921), revolutionary and prominent Russian anarchist; Maria Petrovskaya (stage name Roxanova) (1874–1958), actress best known for her work with the Moscow Art Theatre.

[3] Nikolai Agnivtsev (1888–1932), poet, playwright and prolific children’s author.

[4] François Élie Jules Lemaître (1853–1914), French poet, dramatist and influential critic.

[5] Mikhail Prishvin (1873–1954), nature writer and author of children’s books.

[6] An international language created by a German priest, Johann Martin Schleyer, in 1880, later supplanted by the rise of Esperanto.

[7] Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933), writer, critic and Soviet commissar of enlightenment.

[8] Major Persian poets and writers: Abū Muhammad Muslih al-Dīn bin Abdallāh Shiīrāzī, known as Saadi of Shiraz (1210–91); Omar Khayyam (1048–1131); Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥmmad Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī, better known as Hafiz or Hafez (1315–90).

[9] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), born ‘Abbás in Tehran, leader of the Bahá’í faith 1892–1921.

73

The Hall with a Fountain

The government moved from Petrograd to Moscow. Soon afterwards, my editor at the *People's Power* sent me to the Lefortovo Barracks, where Lenin was to speak to a group of demobilised soldiers.

It was a raw evening. The air in the enormous barrack hall was thick with smoke from harsh *makhorka* tobacco. An icy rain lashed at the grimy windows. There was a sour smell of wet greatcoats and carbolic acid. The soldiers, in dirty puttees and sodden boots, their rifles beside them, sat on the muddy floor. Most of them were men back from the front, stranded in Moscow since the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Thoroughly disgruntled, they didn't believe anyone or anything. They made noisy demands, one day clamouring to be sent back to their home villages, the next flatly refusing to leave Moscow amid loud protests that they were being tricked and the trains were not going to take them home but back to the front. Deserters and suspicious characters were riling them up. As everyone knows, if you bait and confuse the simple Russian long enough he will suddenly fly into a rage and rebel. In the end, the people who suffer the most in these army revolts are the ordnance men and cooks. A persistent rumour was going around Moscow then that the soldiers at the Lefortovo Barracks were at the point of revolt.

I pushed my way with difficulty into the hall and stood at the back. The soldiers gave me, a stranger in civilian clothes, a sullen, threatening stare. I asked them to let me through so I could move closer to the cheap plywood platform up front, but no one would budge an inch. It would have been dangerous to insist. Here and there, soldiers clicked their rifle bolts, as if they were playing around. One of the men yawned loudly. 'To hell with this already!' he said, scratching the back of his head under his sheepskin hat. 'More of the same mumbo-jumbo. I'm fed up with their excuses and stalling.'

'What d'you want? We've got tobacco and they're dishing out some grub. Oughta be enough for us.'

'Moscow's all right,' a scrawny, bearded soldier laughed. 'Take the girls out, get a dose of clap, and you've got yourself a souvenir of the old capital for life. Better than a St George's medal!'

'Get a move on!' soldiers shouted from the back, pounding the floor with their rifle butts. 'Let's hear it! Now you've got us all here, stop wastin' our time!'

'He's just about to start.'

'Who?'

'Looks like Lenin.'

'Lenin? Yeah, right. He's just dying to get a look at your ugly mug.'

'He's got no one else to talk to but you and your toothless gob.'

'Ah, for Christ's sake, he . . .'

'We know what he'll say.'

'More of the same old rubbish.'

'I've already had a bellyful of their slogans. Enough!'

'Listen, brothers, we're not lettin' anyone send us anywhere!'

'That's right. We'll decide who gets sent and where!'

Suddenly, a noise went through the hall, and the men began to move and rose to their feet, sending rippling waves through the cloud of tobacco smoke. Blinded by the smoke and the dim light, I became aware of someone saying in an unusually calm, high voice: 'Let me through, comrades, let me through.' The man rolled his r's as he spoke. The men in the back crowded forward to get a better view. They were met with pointed rifles. The soldiers began shouting and cursing at each other. It seemed gunfire might erupt at any moment.

'Comrades!' said Lenin.

The noise was cut, as if by a knife. The only sound was the wheezing breath of the agitated crowd. Lenin began to speak. I had trouble hearing him. I was being crushed by the throng of soldiers. I could feel a rifle butt digging into my ribs. Some man behind me had laid a meaty hand on my shoulder and squeezed it from time to time. His grip was so strong it hurt. The cigarettes stuck to the soldiers' lips burned down. The men had forgotten all about them and had stopped puffing. Blue wisps of smoke swirled upwards towards the ceiling.

Through the sound of the rain I began to make out the quiet, simple words. Lenin wasn't urging the

men on. He was merely giving these inarticulate and embittered men answers to the questions they were themselves only dimly aware of, answers that they had heard before, but not in the right words. He spoke in an unhurried voice about Brest-Litovsk, about the treachery of the Left SRs,[1] about the union of the workers and the peasants and about bread. He said rowdy meetings and raising hell in Moscow was not the answer, nor was waiting for someone to solve their problems. Rather, they should go back home to work the land and trust the government and the party to do the right thing. I could hear little of what Lenin was saying, but I had a good idea from the shift in the men's breathing, from the way they pushed their hats back on their heads, their gaping mouths and the sudden, unexpected sighs of agreement.

The heavy hand on my shoulder had relaxed. Its weight now suggested the touch of a friend. Once he was back in his village this soldier would pat the cropped heads of his children with this hand, as he sighed with relief thinking that the land was at last theirs. He would be telling himself that all he needed to do now was plough and sow and raise these little rascals to do the same after him. I wanted to see what he looked like. I turned. He was a pale, young recruit with a broad, smooth face covered in fair stubble.

'The chairman!'

'What chairman?' I asked, not understanding.

'It's him, the chairman of the people's commissars. Promising us land and peace. Didn't you hear?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, there you have it! My hands are itching for that land. And I've been gone too long from the family.'

'Pipe down!' hissed our neighbour, a scrawny little soldier whose forage cap kept sliding down over his eyes.

'Hold your tongue!' the recruit growled back and began to hurriedly unbutton his faded tunic. 'Wait, hold on, I want to show you . . .' he muttered. He fumbled around under his collar for a bit and then pulled out a sweat-stained canvas bag hanging on a string around his neck. It held a photograph, folded in half, that he blew the dust off and then handed to me. The only light was an electric bulb protected by a wire mesh high up on the ceiling. I couldn't make out a thing on the photograph. The recruit lit a match and cupped it in his hands. He held it there until it burned down to his fingers and went out.

I looked at the photograph only because I did not want to insult him. I was certain that it was the typical family photograph that I had seen so many times before in peasant huts next to the icons. The mother was always seated in front – a dry, wrinkly old woman with knotty fingers. No matter what she was like in real life – kind and patient or shrill and bossy – she was always photographed with the same stony face and tight lips. In that instant when the camera shutter clicked, she was memorialised as the strict matriarch of the family, the embodiment of the severe progenitor of the clan, while gathered around her, some standing, some seated, were her wooden, bulging-eyed children and grandchildren.

You had to look hard and long at these photographs until you recognised in the stiff figures your well-known friends: the matriarch's quiet, consumptive son-in-law, a village cobbler; his wife, a big-bosomed, shrewish woman in a frilly blouse and strap boots that showed her bare calves; a youth with a forelock and the same terrifying vacant eyes you encounter in street thugs; and then that other one, grinning and black-haired, whom you recognised as the finest blacksmith in the county. And the grandchildren – frightened little creatures who stared out at you like young martyrs. These were children who had known neither kindness nor affection. Perhaps their uncle, the cobbler, had secretly shown pity and given them his old boot lasts as toys. If so, then he had been the only one.

But the photograph the recruit showed me was nothing like these family waxworks. It showed an open carriage with a fine black pair. The recruit, young and handsome in a velvet waistcoat, sat on the box. In his strikingly long arms he held the heavy reins, while in the carriage, turned to face the camera, sat a young and incredibly lovely young peasant woman.

'Light another match,' I said to the recruit.

He hurriedly struck another one, and I noticed that he was looking at the photograph with the same attentive surprise as me. The young woman in the carriage was dressed in a long calico dress with a frilly collar and a white kerchief pulled down low over her forehead like a nun's coif. She was smiling, her lips faintly parted. There was so much tenderness in her smile I felt my heart skip. She had large, sensitive eyes, which appeared to be grey in the photograph.

'I worked as a coachman for the landowner Velyaminov for two years,' he whispered. 'We had our photograph taken in his coach, in secret. That's my bride. Right before our wedding.'

He fell silent.

'Well, what's wrong? Aren't you gonna say something?' he said all of a sudden in a rough, challenging voice. 'Don't tell me you've seen many beauties like her before.'

‘No,’ I replied. ‘Never, not once.’

‘My little Ryabina,’ said the soldier, calmer now. ‘She died right before the war. In childbirth. But we did have a daughter, and she’s just like her mother. Come and visit, my friend, you’re always welcome. I’m from Orël province . . .’

Just then the crowd surged forward, and we were separated. Sheepskin hats and caps flew into the air. Wild cheering erupted near the platform and swept back through the hall before echoing out into the street. I caught sight of Lenin, surrounded by soldiers, walking briskly towards the doors. He was laughing, one hand pressed over his ear to keep from going deaf, and saying something to the scrawny soldier whose forage cap kept falling down over his eyes. I looked around for the young recruit in the milling crowd, but unable to find him I walked out. Cries of ‘Hurrah!’ still rang out in the side street. Apparently, the soldiers were cheering Lenin as he was being driven away.

I walked home through the long dark streets. The rain had stopped, and a wet moon shone among the clouds. I thought about Lenin and the huge mass movement being led by this surprisingly simple man whom I had just seen making his way through a churning crowd of soldiers. I thought of the recruit and of the young peasant woman, and I felt almost as though I had fallen in love with her across the years, just as I loved Russia, and there was something that united all three – Lenin, the movement, this couple – in my mind, and together they captured my spirit and filled me with happiness. I could not quite understand what it was about this recruit, his dead wife and our shared connection to Russia that had made me feel this way. Perhaps it was just the excitement of those unprecedented days we were living through and the sense of a better future. I don’t know.

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The façade of the Hotel Metropole, just below the roof, was decorated with a mosaic reproduction of Vrubel’s *The Princess of the Dream*. The mosaic had been badly damaged by gunfire.

It was in the Metropole that the Central Executive Committee (TsIK), the parliament of the time, met. The TsIK held its sessions in what had formerly been the restaurant. A cement fountain devoid of water stood in the middle. To the left of the fountain and in the centre (as viewed from the dais) sat the Bolsheviks and Left SRs, and to the right the Mensheviks, SRs and Internationalists, small in numbers but quite vociferous. I often attended the sessions. I loved to arrive quite early, before they had started, take a seat in a recess not far from the dais, and read. I enjoyed the hall’s dim light, its echoing emptiness, the two or three bulbs glowing in the crystal wall sconces deep in the corners and even that hotel smell of dusty carpets that no amount of airing could dispel. But most of all I enjoyed waiting for that hour when the merciless debates and brilliant speeches began and the empty hall would be transformed into an arena of stormy historical events.

Rozovsky and Shchelkunov were among the journalists regularly attending the sessions. Rozovsky had a knack for predicting the exact amount of heat an upcoming debate would generate. ‘Hold tight!’ he would warn us. ‘There’s going to be fireworks today.’ At other times he would say with a bored yawn: ‘They’ve got tea at the buffet, let’s go. They’re just going to be splitting legislative hairs for a while.’

For some reason Shchelkunov was afraid of Sverdlov, chairman of the TsIK.[2] He was particularly disturbed by Sverdlov’s intense, piercing gaze, and if he happened to direct it at us journalists, Shchelkunov immediately looked away or ducked behind his neighbour’s back. A short, pale man in a shabby leather jacket, Sverdlov conveyed an impression of iron will with every word and gesture. His deep bass, which belied his sickly appearance, could subdue even his most resolute and fearless opponents, such as the Mensheviks Martov and Dan.[3]

Martov sat closest to the journalists, and we managed to examine him thoroughly. Tall, thin and fierce, a torn scarf wound around his sinewy neck, he was always jumping up, interrupting the speaker and shouting out impatient words in a hoarse, staccato voice. The instigator of every storm, he could not be silenced except by being stripped of his right to speak or suspended for a few sessions. He was rarely in a peaceful mood. On those occasions, he would join us journalists, borrow a book from somebody and lose himself in it, oblivious to time, space and whatever was going on around him in this hall with a fountain.

One day he borrowed *A History of Islam* from Rozovsky. Engrossed in the book, he sank deeper and deeper into his chair, his long spin-dly legs stretched out in front of him. A decree on sending workers’ brigades out into the countryside to requisition grain was being discussed. Martov and Dan showed no signs of derailing the debate, and so slowly everyone relaxed. Newspapers rustled, pencils scratched. Sverdlov removed his hand from the bell and, smiling, listened to his neighbour’s remarks. That more than anything else set everyone at ease, for Sverdlov almost never smiled. The list of speakers was nearing the end when Martov stirred and asked for the floor in an apathetic voice. The audience tensed and began muttering in anticipation.

Martov, shuffling slowly from side to side, made his way up onto the dais, cast a pair of vacant eyes over the hall and began to speak, softly, almost reluctantly, noting that the decree on the dispatch of workers' requisitioning brigades needed, if you please, greater precision, both legalistically and stylistically. For example, clause such-and-such in the decree must be expressed more clearly, cutting a number of unnecessary words, such as 'in the interest of', which would read better as simply 'for', while clause such-and-such contained a clear repetition of something already said in a previous section of the decree.

Martov dug around in his notes for a long time but couldn't find what he was looking for and shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. The audience convinced itself that there would be no outburst. Newspapers began rustling once more. Rozovsky, who had predicted an explosion, couldn't believe it. 'He's simply evaporated, like so much liquid ammonia,' he whispered to me. 'Let's go to the buffet.'

Suddenly, everyone sat up. At first I didn't understand what had happened. Martov's voice was thundering from the dais, practically shaking the walls. It seethed with rage. He had torn his dull, dry notes to pieces and flung them in the air, and they were now falling softly like snowflakes and settling on the chairs in the front row. Martov was shaking his clenched fists and shouting so hard he was practically choking.

'This is treason! You came up with this decree just so you could clear Moscow and Petrograd of every last discontented worker – the finest flowers of the proletariat! Your aim is nothing less than to use this decree to squash the healthy protest of the working class!'

There was a moment's silence, and then everyone leapt out of their seats. A storm of cries filled the hall. Some of them rose above the din: 'Sit down!' 'Traitor!' 'Bravo, Martov!' 'How dare he!' 'The truth hurts!' Sverdlov rang his bell furiously, calling Martov to order, but he kept on shouting, more vehemently than before. He had lulled the hall to sleep with his feigned indifference and was now revelling in their dismay. Sverdlov ordered Martov to stop, but he kept on going. Sverdlov suspended Martov for three sessions, but he ignored him and kept on making accusations, each one more wicked than the last. Finally, Sverdlov summoned the guard. Only then did Martov descend from the dais and slowly, deliberately exit the hall to the accompaniment of a raucous chorus of whistling, stamping, clapping and shouting.

Practically every session of the TsIK caused the walls at the Metropole to shake. Fights were often picked by the Mensheviks and SRs for the silliest of reasons – a speaker's ill-chosen word or his manner of speech. Sometimes instead of indignant shouts, they greeted a speaker with sardonic laughter or, at a speaker's first words, all stood up at once and walked out together, conversing in loud voices as they left. Their behaviour reflected a mixture of impotence and childish bravado. They turned protest into playground tussles.

The whole life of the country had been shaken to its thousand-year-old roots. These were threatening times, full of vague forebodings, expectations, ruthless passions and contradictions. This made it all the more difficult to understand such behaviour, this loud and pointless nonsense. Apparently, their party doctrines were more important to them than the fate of the country or the happiness of the ordinary people. There was something artificial and speculative in these doctrines that had been formulated in smoky cafés and meeting rooms far from Russia and its day-to-day life. Their intent on forcing the future to fit their abstract émigré theories proved both their contempt for people's actual lives and their ignorance of Russian reality.

One session of the TsIK stood out for its deep solemnity. That was just days after the murder of Count Mirbach, the German ambassador. The German government issued an ultimatum demanding that German military units be allowed into the country for the ostensible purpose of protecting their embassy on Denezhny Lane and that the entire area be ceded to German authority. A more brazen and cynical ultimatum would be difficult to imagine. A special session of the TsIK was called immediately after the receipt of the ultimatum.

I remember well that muggy summer day declining towards sunset. The whole city was bathed in the pale gleams of the sun reflected in its windows and the yellowish shadows of the late afternoon. I entered the hall with the fountain and was struck by the silence despite the large gathering. I didn't even notice a faint murmur of whispers. The pendulum of the wall clock ticked its regular beat. But for me and, I think, for everyone else, time had stopped and only this soft, dying sound remained. Sverdlov came in, rang the bell and in an emotionless voice said that the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, would be making a statement. A shudder swept through the audience. Everyone knew that Lenin was ill and his doctors had forbidden him from speaking in public.

Lenin walked quickly up to the dais. He looked pale and thin. A stark white gauze bandage around his neck stood out against the colour of his skin. He gripped the edge of the rostrum firmly and held the

room in his stare for quite some time. We could hear his laboured breathing. Softly and slowly, one hand now pressed against his throat, Lenin said that the Council of People's Commissars had categorically rejected the impudent ultimatum of the German government and decided to mobilise immediately all the armed forces of the Russian Federation. In utter silence, arms were raised and then lowered in favour of the government's actions.

Shaken by what we had heard, we walked out of the Metropole onto Teatralnaya Square. Dusk had fallen over Moscow by now, and a Red Army unit, bristling with bayonets at the ready, went marching past the hotel.

[1] A minority faction broke from the Socialist Revolutionaries in 1917 to form the Left SRs, who abandoned support of the Provisional Government in favour of the Bolsheviks and a radicalisation of the revolution. The Left SRs themselves split with the Bolsheviks after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

[2] Yakov Sverdlov (1885–1919), early Bolshevik and chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets.

[3] Fëdor Dan (1871–1947), a founder of the Menshevik Party, opponent of the Bolshevik coup.

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The Zone of Silence

Every once in a while, I had the day off. I liked to walk to Noevsky Gardens on the other side of the city or wander about the outskirts, usually beyond Presnya and Devichee Field. Those were hungry times. An eighth of a pound of black bread was the daily ration. I took my eighth, two or three apples (my neighbour Lipochka supplied me with them) and a book, and headed out for the whole day until dark.

The outskirts of Moscow differed little from what were then called Russia's 'downgraded' towns, places that had lost their status as administrative centres. A ring of these quiet suburbs circled the enormous, agitated capital, whose hum did not impinge on them. Only rarely did a gust of wind from Moscow carry all the way out here, along with a swirl of dust, the distant notes of 'The Internationale' or the crackle of gunfire. Brief gun battles in the streets were rather common then. They erupted suddenly and ended just as suddenly. The suburbs were empty. This was what attracted me to them the most. I don't know what I liked better – the short break from these stressful days in the city or the search for some peace and quiet, a place where I might relax, calm myself and take a look at what was happening around me from a different angle, and so, perhaps, make some sense of it all.

These visits always filled me with the conviction that before me lay the most varied and diverse kind of life, perhaps even too much so. Why it was I felt this so strongly here, on the outskirts of Moscow, I still don't know. I would look around at the neglected back alleys overgrown with weedy grass, some faded laundry drying on a line, and think how I would surely come back in a few years to understand how much I had changed while in the meantime this same spot was still just as forgotten and unchanged as before. The peeling church domes would have the same dull sheen and the bone-dry washing would flap in the wind as before, while I, perhaps, would have travelled, written books and, best of all, fallen in love. It was as though I were calling on this back alley to bear witness to my life. I wanted to use this corner of Moscow to mark my passage through time.

But I was wrong, of course. When I returned to Moscow five years later and went back to one of these little spots, I saw a new white building surrounded by young lime trees and a sign in front identifying it as such-and-such district school of music.

The outskirts had their charm – the crooked old wooden houses being held up by heavy beams blackened with age, the long-abandoned little manufactories, their boilers red with rust and lying on their sides among the weeds, the timber sheds smelling of birch bark. There was charm in the little benches, buffed to a bright gloss over the years, standing at gateways where so many sunflower shells had been trodden into the ground that it had turned as hard as asphalt. There was charm in the roads soft with goosegrass, and in the raised barriers at the crossings of disused railway lines. Black locomotives with gaping funnels, most likely from the time of Stephenson, stood on the tracks, their fires extinguished for good. Swallows nested in the drivers' cabs. There was also charm in the dark, ancient elms, weak from age and almost devoid of leaves even at the height of summer, in the slag heaps overgrown with dandelions, in the nest boxes and in the fences made of broken iron bedsteads and church railings, all entwined with bittersweet morning glory. Geraniums in old tins blazed on the windowsills, looking as exotic as birds of paradise. In one yard I came upon a strange sight – a kennel and inside it a carmine, black-tailed cock (taking the place of the missing dog), chained by the foot, apparently to correct its insolent and aggressive manner.

I loved the fluff from the poplars rolling down the streets in light, silver-grey coils; the mangy, miaowing kittens playing in the backyards; the old women whose wrinkled faces appeared to have been carved out of knotty brown wood; the nasturtiums with their fat round leaves and hooded red flowers; the sparrows drinking from the puddles around the water pumps; the fly-specked oleograph of *The Ritual Kiss* seen through the open window of a darkened room along with a bored canary in its cage, a potted ficus, a broken and crudely glued-together porcelain setter and a moth-eaten stuffed oriole; or the smoke rising straight up into the white sky from a crooked samovar out in the middle of a yard. As everyone knows, when a crooked samovar sends up straight smoke, a heat wave is coming.

Some child had scrawled the words 'Heaven', 'Hell', 'Treasure Island' and 'Winter Palace' in charcoal on a few enormous cement pipes that lay abandoned in a vacant plot. Apparently the 'Winter Palace' had

recently come under attack – it was marked by fresh red scars from flying bricks. Now and then the wind filled the street with the smell of stagnant water and tomato plants. The houses backed onto leafy green kitchen gardens. Instead of scarecrows, pinwheels made of shiny coloured paper twirled on tall sticks placed among the beds. In the distance, above the dust and the dull haze, the cupolas of Moscow and the great dome of Christ the Saviour Cathedral, like the helmet of some medieval knight, shone dark gold. The clouds, lushly whipped egg whites with a slight pinkish tint from the sun, rose high over the churches. Seen from here, Moscow belonged to Asia – a heathen temple of Orthodox saints sculpted out of brown clay or cast in iron, the cylindrical towers of the Kremlin wreathed in the endlessly ascending flights of the pigeons.

The slimy ponds on the edge of the city were particularly nice. Sunken tins gleamed through their water, as green as olive oil. Rotting piles, dangling thin strands of slime, stuck up out of the water at odd angles. It all smelled like a chemist's shop. Along the shore, willows, their trunks scorched by lightning strikes, bowed over the water and provided shade. I liked to read in that shade, sitting on the warm ground and watching the marsh gases bubbling up from the depths, one round sphere after another. Long-legged insects scurried over the surface. The local boys called them 'water-racers'. If you tossed a match into the pond, they would all race over and inspect it as a group, and then, as soon as they had convinced themselves it wasn't edible, scuttle away just as fast. Into every one of these ponds, frothy water was forever gushing from some old rusty pipe. Clouds of fry gathered in the water beneath the mouth of the pipes. The boys made steamships out of strips of wood. Girls hitched up their skirts and waded in to rinse the family laundry. They squealed every time some invisible water-creature darted around their feet. The girls swore that it must be leeches.

At one of these ponds I often met a glum man in torn overalls. He lived off his kitchen garden and the fish he caught in the ponds. He would plant five or six rods in the banks and every so often catch a small carp no bigger than a five-kopeck coin. The old man would sit there hour after hour, nibbling away on his black bread, just like me. I struck up a conversation with him and he took me to see his garden. It seemed to me more beautiful than the most luxurious rose garden. Its green freshness was full of the rich smell of dill and mint.

'So you see, my friend,' he said, 'it just so happens this too is a way of life. There are all sorts of ways to live. You can fight for freedom, you can try to remake humanity or you can grow tomatoes. Everything has its own price, its own dignity and its own glory.'

'What exactly are you trying to say?' I asked.

'That we need to be tolerant and understanding. As I see it, that's the only path to real freedom. All of us should devote ourselves to the work we like best, and no one should try to stop us. Then nothing can frighten us, and no enemy can stop us.'

I liked to walk through the kitchen gardens and waste ground, where jagged splinters of sunlight from shards of broken glass stabbed my eyes, to the Moscow River, its low bank covered in thick greenery that spilled down from Noevsky Gardens. Slight films of oil formed twirling rainbows on the water's surface reminiscent of a Gypsy's shawl. A boy with a boat would row me across the river to the gardens on the other side. The tall lime trees there with their shadows lent the area a certain grandeur. The trees were in bloom. Their strong smell seemed as though it had somehow been transported here from some springtime in a far-off southern clime. I loved to imagine this spring. The picture in my mind made me love the world even more. Having no one to share my feelings with, the only thing for me to do was jot them down on paper, which I did. I soon misplaced these notes, although without any regret. I was ashamed of them. They were completely at odds with those savage days.

Noevsky Gardens had long been famous for its flowers, but it had gradually fallen into decline and run wild, and by the time of the revolution all that remained was a small conservatory. Nonetheless, a few old women and one old male gardener carried on the work there. They soon grew used to my visits and even began to talk to me about their troubles. The gardener complained that flowers were now only requested for funerals and state occasions. Every time he said this, one of the women – she was thin with bright, pale eyes – looked embarrassed for him and liked to assure me that very soon they would most likely be growing flowers to plant in the city squares and to sell to people on the streets.

'No matter what you say,' she would always try to convince me, although I had never once contradicted her, 'people simply can't live without flowers. Take lovers, for instance. There always have been, are now, and always will be. And can you tell me a better way than flowers to express your love? Nope, our profession will never die out.'

Sometimes the gardener cut some stocks or carnations for me. I was ashamed to carry them through hungry, anxious Moscow, and so I always wrapped them up in paper in such a way that no one could tell what I had in my hand. One day the paper came undone on the tram. I didn't notice until an elderly

woman in a white kerchief asked me: ‘Where did you find such beauties at a time like this?’

‘Careful how you hold them,’ the conductor said. ‘Or someone’ll push up against you and crush them. You know how people are these days.’

‘Who’s pushing?’ a sailor with a heavy cartridge belt asked in a threatening manner. His eyes landed on a knife grinder trying to squeeze through the passengers, dragging his machine behind him. ‘Where d’you think you’re going? Can’t you see – the guy here’s got flowers. Clumsy oaf !’

‘My, aren’t we sensitive!’ jeered the grinder sarcastically. ‘And him in the navy no less!’

‘You leave the navy out of this, or I’ll give you something to cry about!’

‘Oh Lord! All this over some flowers!’ sighed a young mother holding her infant. ‘You know, my husband, such a serious, respectable man, he brought me cherry blossoms in hospital when I had this little one here, he’s my first.’

I became aware of someone behind me breathing heavily, followed by a whisper, so soft that at first I didn’t know where it was coming from. I turned round. A pale little girl of about ten, in a faded pink frock, was staring at me imploringly with eyes as grey and round as pewter saucers. ‘Uncle,’ she said in a hoarse and somehow strange voice, ‘give me a flower! Please, please, give me one.’

I gave her a carnation. The girl took it and then began pushing her way with every bit of strength through the passengers, who were now muttering with envy and indignation, towards the rear platform. In an instant she jumped from the moving tram and disappeared.

‘Crazy fool!’ said the conductor. ‘The girl must be out of her mind! We’d all ask for a flower if we didn’t have a conscience!’

I pulled out one more carnation and gave it to her. She, an older woman, blushed and looked down at the flower, her eyes radiant and welling with tears. Immediately, several hands reached out to me. I gave away the rest of the flowers and then noticed that there, in that battered tram, I was now surrounded by more friendly smiles, more shining eyes, more joy than I had ever seen before or since. It was as though dazzling sunlight had burst into that grubby tram and brought all these weary, anxious people back to life. They wished me happiness, good health, the most beautiful bride in the world and Lord knows what else.

A bony elderly man in a worn black jacket lowered his close-cropped head, opened his canvas satchel and carefully laid his flower inside. I could swear I saw a tear fall from his eye. It was more than I could stand, and so I hopped off before we reached the next stop. As I walked I kept thinking about the memories – whether sad or happy – that the flower must have brought to life for this man and wondered for how long he had carried these feelings inside him until his heart had at last broken and caused him to cry in front of us strangers. Everyone, I am sure, treasures in their soul some memory, as delicate as the scent of the lime trees in Noevsky Gardens, of a glimmer of happiness long buried under the squalor of everyday life.

Wandering the outskirts of Moscow and through Noevsky Gardens, I escaped into a zone of silence that lay so improbably close to the city. These escapes from the overwhelming tumult of Moscow were understandable. Everything was happening so fast that events didn’t even have the time to follow one after another, but piled up in great heaps all at once, each and every day. Yet just a few steps away from this cataclysmic upheaval, normal life went on as before. This too, no doubt, had its own logic.

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Revolt

The empty stage of the Bolshoi Theatre was set for the scene of the Palace of the Facets from *Boris Godunov*. A woman in a black dress, clicking her heels, came running out onto the stage and up to the footlights. A scarlet carnation was pinned to her bodice. From a distance she looked young, but in the glare of the lights you could see that her yellow face was covered with fine wrinkles and her eyes possessed a sickly, rheumy lustre. The woman was clutching a small steel Browning in her hand. She raised it over her head, stamped her feet and let out a piercing cry: 'Long live the uprising!'

The hall cried out in response: 'Long live the uprising!'

The woman was the well-known Socialist Revolutionary Maria Spiridonova.[1] This is how we journalists learned about the outbreak of the Left SR revolt in Moscow. A great many events had led up to this moment.

The Congress of Soviets was in session. No one had better seats at the congress than the journalists. We had been seated in the orchestra pit and could see and hear everything perfectly from there. Of all the speakers the only one I remember well was Lenin, and not what he said, but his gestures and manner of speaking. He sat close to the table, hunched over, and writing quickly. It looked as if he were paying no attention to the other speakers. All you could see was his bulging forehead and the occasional mocking glint of his squinting eyes directed at the speaker. From time to time he looked up from his notes and uttered some light-hearted or biting comment in response to one of the speeches. The audience would erupt with laughter and applause. Lenin would lean back in his chair and let out an infectious laugh.

He did not 'lecture', but spoke in a simple, relaxed manner, as if he were talking with a friend and not before an enormous auditorium. He spoke without pathos, without pomposity, in a plain, everyday manner, with a slight rolling of his r's, all of which lent an air of sincerity to his words. Sometimes, however, he would pause for a moment and then speak with a steely voice free of the slightest doubt. He walked back and forth across the stage as he spoke, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets or casually holding the armholes of his black waistcoat. There was nothing the least bit monumental about him, no awareness of his own greatness, no desire to utter sacred truths. He was simple and natural in word and gesture. You could tell from his eyes that along with matters of state, he was just as happy at a spare moment to talk about any sort of human activity or endeavour, be it foraging for mushrooms, fishing or the need for scientific weather forecasting.

At the congress Lenin spoke about the country's need for peace and breathing space, about food and bread. The word 'bread', which in the mouths of other speakers sounded like some abstract, purely statistical concept, became something real and concrete when Lenin spoke, that very black bread for which the country hungered at the time. But in no way did this diminish the weight of his words or their political importance.

Sitting in one of the boxes during the congress was the German ambassador, Count Mirbach – a tall, balding and haughty man with a monocle. At the time the Germans occupied Ukraine, where peasant uprisings had been breaking out, raging and then dying away, in various regions. On the very first day of the congress the Left SR Kamkov took the floor. He unleashed an angry speech against the Germans, demanding a break with Germany, immediate war and support for the insurgents. An alarmed commotion spread through the hall. Kamkov marched almost right up to the box where Mirbach was sitting and screamed at him: 'Long live the uprising in Ukraine! Down with the German occupation! Down with Mirbach!'

The Left SRs leapt from their seats. They shouted and shook their fists at Mirbach. Kamkov shook his fist too, and when his jacket fell open, you could see a revolver hanging from his belt. Mirbach sat unperturbed, not even removing his monocle, and continued reading his newspaper. The cries, whistles and stamping of feet rose to an impossible din. It seemed that at any moment the massive chandelier would come crashing down and the plaster mouldings would break loose from the walls. Even Sverdlov, with his powerful voice, couldn't bring the hall under control. He kept ringing his bell, but only the journalists in the orchestra pit could hear it. The sound couldn't make its way out into the hall, now given over to wild shouts. Finally, Sverdlov closed the meeting. Mirbach stood and slowly walked out of

the box, leaving his newspaper on the railing.

The theatre's hallways were jammed, and it was impossible to squeeze through the crowds. The guards had thrown open all the doors, but nonetheless the theatre emptied slowly. Emotions were running so high that physical confrontations and violence could have broken out at any moment. Yet, despite everyone's fears, the rest of the day in Moscow passed with unexpected calm.

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The next day, 6 July, I arrived early at the Bolshoi Theatre, only to find the orchestra pit already filled with the other journalists. Everyone had come early expecting something to happen. We waited for a brief statement from the government regarding yesterday's demonstration by the Left SRs. The hall was full. The meeting had been set for two o'clock in the afternoon. But when the time arrived, the presidium's table remained empty. Another half-hour passed. Still the meeting did not begin. Puzzled murmurs floated throughout the hall.

Then Smidovich, secretary of the Soviet of People's Commissars, appeared on the stage and said the session would be somewhat delayed and asked the Bolsheviks to join him at a nearby building for a party meeting. The Bolsheviks left. The hall emptied. No one but the Left SRs remained. Everyone now understood that only something extraordinary could account for the delay in the day's session. The journalists bolted for the telephones to call their editors and ask what had happened. But an armed Red Army soldier stood guard over each telephone and no one was allowed near. The theatre's exits had all been locked and were watched by armed guards. They were under orders not to let anyone leave.

Soon, a rumour of unknown origin began to spread through the theatre that Count Mirbach had been killed three hours earlier at his embassy. The journalists were seized with panic. The Left SRs silently got up and went to sit by the exits. Strange sounds from outside could be heard in the theatre – a muffled crash followed by heavy pounding, as if wooden piles were being driven into the ground not far from the theatre. A grey-haired usher beckoned me over with his finger and said: 'If you wish to know what's going on in the city, take that iron staircase up to the flies. But don't let anyone see you. You'll find a tiny window off to the left up there. Have a look-see. You really ought to. Oh, what troubles! Dear Lord, save and protect us!'

I carefully climbed the steep iron stairs (there was no railing) up to a small, dusty window, more like a narrow slit cut into the thick wall. I looked and could see the far edge of Teatralnaya Square and one side of the Hotel Metropole. From the direction of the City Duma Red Army men were running crouched forward towards the Metropole, dropping suddenly to the pavement, quickly firing from their rifles, and then getting back up and running on. Then, from off to the left in the direction of Lubyanskaya Square, came the staccato clatter of a machine-gun and the boom of a cannon. It was now clear that while we had been sitting locked in the theatre with the Left SRs, an uprising had begun in Moscow.

I quietly returned to the orchestra pit. Just then Spiridonova came running out onto the stage and the scene with which I began this chapter took place. It all became perfectly clear – it was the Left SRs who had started the uprising. In reply to Spiridonova's cry all the Left SRs drew revolvers from their pockets and out from under their jackets. But at that very moment the calm, stern voice of the Kremlin commandant rang out from the gallery: 'Ladies and gentlemen, Left SRs! If you make one move to leave the theatre or to use your weapons, we shall open fire on the whole hall from the upper gallery. I advise you to sit quietly and await your fate.'

None of us journalists cared to perish due to the negligence of the guards, who had, evidently, forgotten to let us out in time. We sent a delegation headed by Oleg Leonidov to speak to the commandant. He replied, politely but firmly, that, unfortunately, he had not received any instructions about the journalists. Eventually, however, he gave in to our pleas and ordered all of us to gather quietly in the vestibule of the theatre, where the guards quickly threw open the doors and pushed us out into Teatralnaya Square. At first, after the dim light of the theatre, I was blinded by the setting sun. Suddenly, a bullet struck the column beside me, hissed and then seemed to fly off in the direction it had come from. After this, as if upon someone's order, bullets started methodically cracking along the length of the wall, fortunately above our heads.

'To Kopievsky Lane!' Leonidov yelled out, bending over towards the ground and then racing around the corner of the theatre. The rest of us ran after him.

Around the corner everything was calm. The bullets were still flying by, and closely, but off to the side. We could tell only by the light whistling sound and the bursting glass and the puffs of white plaster erupting like fountains off the building across from the theatre. As Shchelkunov was running a tattered old book fell out of his briefcase. Several times he turned and tried to run back around the corner to retrieve it, but we held him by his arms and wouldn't let him go. Eventually he managed to break free,

crawled across the ground to the book and returned flushed and covered in dirt, but happy.

'You and those books of yours, you're a dangerous maniac!' Leonidov yelled at him. 'You're mad!'

'What?!' Shchelkunov shot back. 'This happens to be a first edition of Rousseau's *Confessions*. You're the one who's mad, not me.'

The gunfire quickly moved away beyond Lubyanskaya Square. The Left SRs were retreating. Back at the newspaper I learned that Count Mirbach had indeed been killed that morning by the Left SR Blyumkin. This had been the signal for the uprising. The rebels had managed to seize the Pokrovsky Barracks and the telegraph office on Myasnitskaya Street and advanced almost all the way to Lubyanskaya Square. The Left SRs in the theatre had all been arrested soon after we had been let out. By that evening the rebels had been forced out of the city and retreated to the goods station on the Kazan Railway and the main road to Ryazan, where they began to disperse.

As suddenly as it had begun, the uprising was over.

[1] Maria Spiridonova (1884–1941), longtime revolutionary, key figure in the Left SRs, imprisoned by the Bolsheviks in 1918, executed under Stalin.

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Material for a History of Russian Houses

Sometimes the history of houses can be more interesting than the lives of people. Houses last longer and are witnesses to several generations. Local historians are the only ones who take the trouble to study the history of old houses, and it's normal for these historians to be treated with condescension as harmless lunatics. Yet it's these same people who collect our history one little bit at a time and teach us to know and love our country and its traditions.

I am convinced that if we could reconstruct the history of some old house in every last detail, to follow the lives of everyone who had lived there, to describe their ways of life, and to learn everything that had happened there, we would end up with a great *roman de mœurs* perhaps more revealing than the novels of Balzac. Moreover, the life of every house is joined together with quite a number of things that have also been around for a long time and experienced their own extensive and revealing journeys. Unfortunately, such a history is well-nigh impossible. Things don't talk, and people are forgetful, lack for curiosity, and treat their faithful though inanimate assistants with insulting carelessness.

Things are crafted by human hands, like for example Pinocchio, who was carved out of a knotty log by the old carpenter Geppetto. Pinocchio came to life and started a train of events such as only a magical fairy could sort out. If things really could come to life, what a mess they would unleash in our lives and how much richer history would be. They would have something to say.

No one can say for certain how many large, private homes there were in Moscow before the October Revolution. People say at least three hundred. These were mostly merchants' homes. Only a few of them belonged to the nobility. Nearly all their urban mansions had burned down back in 1812. Following the October Revolution, the anarchists seized most of these homes of the Moscow merchants. They enjoyed life amid all the fine old antique furniture, chandeliers and rugs, and treated these furnishings in their own distinctive way. Paintings were used for target practice with their Mausers. Exquisite rugs replaced tarpaulins to cover the stacks of cartridge cases out in the yard. Rare books from the library were used to board up the windows as protection against gunfire. Ballrooms with intricate parquet floors served as dormitories for the anarchists and all sorts of dubious characters.

Moscow was ripe with rumours about the dissolute lives of the anarchists in these mansions. Prim old ladies whispered in horror among themselves of abominable orgies. But these were not orgies, just the usual drinking bouts at which hooch instead of champagne was drunk to help wash down salted fish as hard as rock. They were a collection of riff-raff, strung-out youths and neurotic girls – a forerunner to the Makhno gang[1] right in the heart of Moscow. The anarchists even had their own theatre. It was called Izid. Its posters advertised it as a 'theatre of mysticism, eroticism and spiritual anarchy' that was devoted to 'an idea raised to the point of fanaticism'. What this idea was, the posters didn't say. Every time I came across one of these posters, I thought to myself that Rachinsky must somehow be involved with the theatre.

I was writing my first novel and often stayed at the newspaper's office late into the night or even until morning. I slept on our battered old editorial sofa with its broken springs. It sometimes happened that in the middle of the night a spring would snap and give me a good smack in the ribs. I preferred to write in the office instead of my sleepy and musty lodgings where the tap dripped in the bathroom and the landlady was always shuffling around outside my door in her slippers. The light in my room bothered her, and she got up several times during the night to check the electricity meter.

Back at the newspaper, I usurped Kuskova's expansive, carpeted office with its large writing desk. Sometimes I fell asleep at this desk for ten or fifteen minutes and then woke up rested and refreshed. The office cat slept on the desk opposite me, his paws tucked in. Now and then he would open his eyes just wide enough to give me a friendly look, as if to say: 'Working, are you? All right then, go on, keep at it! I'll just have another little snooze.' But then one night, the cat woke with a start. His ears twitched this way and that. He stared at me with eyes as green as gooseberries and let out a hoarse miaow.

I listened and caught the sound of gunfire. It crackled somewhere in the dark streets and then started to get closer. The intensity of the shooting made it clear this was not just some random street fight.

Just then the phone rang. The sound made me jump. The Moscow news editor was on the line.

‘They’ve started disarming the anarchists!’ he shouted into the receiver. ‘They’ve launched raids on the houses. It’s a good thing you’re at the office. I’m on my way, but in the meantime, do me a favour and head over to the Morozov house on Vozdvizhenka Street and see what’s going on. But be careful.’

I went out into the street. It was dark and deserted. Wild shooting was coming from the direction of Malaya Dmitrovka Street, where the anarchists were entrenched in the former Merchants’ Club and had even set up two field guns at the gate. I picked my way through some back streets until I came to the Morozov house on Vozdvizhenka Street. Every Muscovite knew this house with its grey, sea-shell-encrusted walls which looked like some sort of fanciful castle. The house was dark. It looked black and sinister. I climbed the granite steps to the heavy front doors, so massive they reminded me of the bronze doors of a medieval cathedral. I listened. Not a sound came from within. I decided that the anarchists must have left, but knocked, cautiously, just the same.

Suddenly, the door flew open without a sound. Someone grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. The door slammed shut. I found myself in utter darkness. Several people held me tightly.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked calmly. The question sounded ridiculous, even to me. It was obvious what was the matter, and I could guess the matter might end quite poorly for me.

‘He’s obviously an agent,’ a young woman’s voice said close to my ear. ‘We’ve got to report him to Comrade Ognevoi.’

‘Hold on,’ I said, trying to talk my way out of this. ‘The days of the Count of Monte Cristo have come and gone. Turn on a light and I’ll explain everything to you. Please, just let me go.’

‘Well, ain’t that something,’ said the same woman’s voice. ‘He’d like us to let him go. You’re nothin’ but a rat, a Bolshevik spy, and you’re goin’ nowhere. But I promise not to touch a hair on that pretty lil’ head of yours unless you start something funny. Got it?’

It was clear this kind of talk was not natural to her. She had picked it up recently and was trying it out for the first time. I lost my temper.

‘Queen of Anarchy,’ I said in the direction of the invisible woman, ‘stop playing the fool. You’ve been reading too many cheap novels. It’s bad for you at your age.’

‘Search him and then lock him up in the corner drawing room to the left,’ she said in an icy voice, as though she had not heard me. ‘I’ll report to Comrade Ognevoi.’

‘Do what you like!’ I snapped. ‘Go ahead and report me to Comrade Ognevoi or whoever you want. I don’t give a damn what you do!’

‘Watch it. You’ll be sorry for talk like that, you rat!’ the woman said.

Two men led me down a dark corridor. One of them was wearing a leather jacket. It felt cold against my hand. Their mouths shut, they dragged me up and down several narrow flights of stairs, shoved me into a room, locked the door from the outside, took away the key and said that they would shoot me through the door if I tried to make any noise, and then they left. I heard one of them say to me in a surprisingly calm voice as they turned to go: ‘That’s no way for a spy to act, you Bolshevik scum. If you worked for us, I’d show you a thing or two.’

I had a box of matches with me, but I couldn’t bring myself to light one to have a look around. Who knew what these anarchists were capable of. They might think I was sending a signal and start shooting through the door. I went over and felt it. The door was covered with intricate carving. Next I began to run my hands over the walls. I caught a fingernail on some silk panelling and jumped with fright. Finally, I came to a large armchair, sat down and began to wait.

At first, I found the whole affair amusing. The anarchists really had taken me for a spy. I found this completely ridiculous, but there was nothing I could do about it. And what about this young woman? Her voice seemed familiar. I searched my memory and recalled once hearing an anarchist with the same voice at a demonstration near the Gogol Monument. She had a long black fringe, greedy, cocaine-addled eyes and huge turquoise earrings. The crowd shouted her down and wouldn’t let her finish, so she had pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and then walked off, swinging her hips and smiling contemptuously. Yes, of course, it was her.

I was happy to go on sitting in the soft, comfortable chair and to wait and see what would happen next. I was certain they would let me go the moment I showed them my press card from the *People’s Power*. Over an hour passed. I could hear rifle fire in the distance and once there was the muffled sound of a large explosion. I was dying for a cigarette. Finally, I couldn’t hold out any longer. I sat down on the floor behind the chair, pulled out a cigarette and struck a match. It flared up brightly, like magnesium, and for an instant illuminated the semicircular room. The flame bounced around the walls, reflecting off several mirrors and crystal vases. I hurried to light my cigarette and then blew out the match, at which point I noticed why it had burned so brightly – the head on it was double the normal size.

The next thing I knew the windows began shattering from rifle fire out in the street. Plaster showered

from the ceiling. I stayed on the floor and didn't move. The shooting was getting stronger. It occurred to me that the flame from my match might have served as a signal to the Red Guards who had quietly surrounded the house. They were mostly shooting at the windows in my room. Bullets hit the chandelier. I could hear the crystals shatter as they hit the floor. I had unwittingly played the role of a spy that the anarchists had cast me in. I realised now that my position was not a good one. If the anarchists had noticed the light from my match, they would soon burst through the door and shoot me.

But apparently the anarchists didn't see the match, or they had much bigger things to worry about now. They were shooting back. I could hear steps running down the hall and something heavy rolling right behind – no doubt a machine-gun. Someone was swearing and shouting to the others: 'Four of you, up to the first floor! Stay away from the windows!'

Something crashed to the ground and shattered. People charged past my room, a window frame cracked, and that familiar woman's voice sounded: 'Over here, comrades! Through the hole in the wall!' There was another rush of noise and then all was silent. Now and then the Red Guards fired a shot at one of the windows, as though testing to see whether anyone was still hiding inside. Finally, the silence became complete. It seemed that the anarchists had fled. This didn't last long. Heavy footsteps pounded up and down the halls again, I heard the sound of clanking rifles, and then voices: 'Search the whole house! Turn on the lights!' 'Just look how fine they were livin' in here, the bastards!' 'Watch that corner – they could hit us with a grenade from there.' There was the sound of footsteps outside my door. Someone was tugging hard on the handle, but the door wouldn't open.

'Locked himself in, the dog,' came a scratchy voice.

The door began to shake. I kept quiet. What could I do? There was no point in trying to explain through the door that I had been captured and locked in here by the anarchists. Who would believe me?

'Open up, you bastard!' I could now hear several different voices yelling at me from the other side of the door. Next, one of them fired at the door and it cracked. They began smashing it with their rifle butts. It began to give way.

'Built to last,' said the scratchy voice admiringly.

The door finally snapped in two, and the light of an electric torch hit me square in the eyes.

'Just one left!' shouted a young Red Guardsman, a smile on his face. He pointed his rifle at me. 'All right, get up, you anarchist. Off to headquarters! You've had your fun, but it's all over now!'

I went willingly to headquarters. It was located in a small house on Povarskaya Street. There, at a desk in the front hall, sat an unbelievably thin fair-haired man in a field jacket. He had a pointy little beard and amused eyes and looked me over slowly. He smiled. I smiled back.

'Well, let's hear it,' he said, lighting his pipe. 'But keep it short. I don't have much time to waste on you.'

I told him everything just as it had happened and showed him my press card and identity papers. He barely glanced at them.

'We ought to lock you up for a week or two for excessive curiosity. But as of now that's still not illegal. So clear off ! And I advise you to leave that newspaper of yours. It's useless. What's wrong with you, anyway? You got a problem with the Soviet government?'

I answered that just the opposite, all my hopes for a little bit of happiness for the Russian people depended on the new government.

'Well, then,' he said, squinting from the pipe smoke in his eyes, 'we'll do our best to justify your trust in us, young man. We're so flattered, truly we are, just terribly flattered. Now get lost!'

I went out into the street. I could still hear scattered gunfire. My face burned from shame. The man had been mocking me. Deep down I knew that he had been right, however, and that no matter what clever, cutting replies I might think up now, in the end they would not disprove his scornful words.

By midday all the anarchists had been driven from their houses. Some of them fled Moscow, others hid and gave up the struggle. The Muscovites who had slept through the events of the night stared with amazement the next day at the bullet-riddled houses, the porters sweeping up the piles of broken glass, and the gaping hole in the wall of the Merchants' Club on Malaya Dmitrovka Street made by the only shell fired during the battle. Back then, events happened so suddenly that it was quite possible to sleep right through them.

[1] Nestor Makhno (1888–1953), Ukrainian anarchist and commander of the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine during the civil war.

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A Few Explanations

The *People's Power* was closed in the middle of the summer of 1918, just like every other newspaper that called itself 'independent'. Soon after I received a letter from my sister, Galya, from Kopan. A railway guard from Bryansk had dropped it off at my lodgings while I happened to be out, and he left no information behind for me to look him up. The letter was tattered and creased and stained with engine oil. It had travelled for over a month to reach me in Moscow. Galya wrote:

> You promised Mama you'd come and visit in the spring, yet you still haven't come and we're losing hope of seeing you. Mama has aged a great deal in recent days. You wouldn't recognise her. She goes days without saying a word, and then at night, when she thinks I'm asleep, she cries so loudly that even I can hear it, and I, dear Kostik, have lost almost all my hearing in the past year.
>
> Is it really impossible for you to give her this last bit of joy? We talk of nothing but you and know nothing of how you are getting along, what you are doing or even if you're well. We're terrified at the thought of what might happen to you. Your life is so rich and full, and Mama has no one but you. Please try to understand this, Kostik.
>
> Yesterday Mama said that if you don't come by the middle of August, then she and I will leave here together on foot for Moscow. Mama is convinced we'll make it, somehow. We'll leave everything here – it's no use to us anymore! – and take nothing but our knapsacks. We have little money, but Mama always says the world is full of good people and so she fears nothing. We have to leave while it's still warm, well before winter. Maybe we'll even manage to travel by train part of the way, although we hear that they aren't running anymore.
>
> My dear Kostik, let us hear from you, somehow, tell us how you are and whether we should wait for you. We've been living all by ourselves in these woods. It's like being trapped in a lair, and we can't understand why it is we haven't been murdered yet.

I felt like someone had taken a razor to my heart. I had to go. But how? How could I make my way to Ukraine? At the time, Ukraine, the Donbass and Crimea were occupied by the German army. Kiev was under the control of a German puppet – Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi,[1] a polished, long-legged and stupid officer. Ukrainian newspapers praised him for his disapproval of décolletage, but other than this they could find nothing positive to say. Even the Germans made rude jokes about their fake hetman.

It would take more than a month to acquire an exit visa from the Commissariat of Internal Affairs to leave Soviet Russia. It was already late July, and I figured I wouldn't receive the visa until the end of August. I knew Mama – no matter what, she and Galya were certain to set out on foot in mid-August for Moscow, regardless of the risk to their lives. I didn't have a day to waste. I had to leave immediately.

It turned out that to enter Ukraine I had to acquire a visa from the Ukrainian consul as well. I walked over to the consulate, located off the courtyard in the back of a large building on Tverskaya Street. A faded yellow and blue flag hung limply from a pole tied to the railing of a balcony. Washing had been hung up to dry on the balcony, and the consul's baby lay asleep in a pram. An old nanny sat rocking the pram gently with her foot and singing softly:

> The doves have come to pay a call,
> And they're carrying figs for one and all,
> Here's one for Petrik, Petrik, our little boy,
> Our little Colonel, no bigger than a toy.

It was impossible to get anywhere near the consulate door. Hundreds of people were sitting and lying about on the dusty ground waiting their turn. Some had been waiting for over a month, listening to the song about little Petrik over and over, vainly trying to ingratiate themselves with the consul's nanny, and slowly being driven insane by the utter uncertainty of their situation.

I realised that I would have to sneak over the border without official permission. I learned that several Petrograd journalists from the so-called 'boulevard press' were planning a trip to Ukraine. Their

documents were in order. A local reporter introduced me to them. With a certain reluctance, they agreed to take me with them and to help me at the frontier, although, as their leader, an irritable man who wore a gold pince-nez and grey spats, said, ‘only within the bounds of reason’. On where exactly these bounds lay, he was silent. And I knew well myself that if I were caught, no one would be coming to my defence.

The plan was to leave in three days. Nothing much happened during those days, other than that I learned Romanin had arrived in Moscow. I raced over to the house in the Yakimanka neighbour-hood where he typically lodged, but the surly woman who opened the door refused to let me in and said that he stayed there only a few nights a month. I left a letter for him but never heard from Romanin again. Once more I felt that familiar bitter sadness of losing another beloved friend. People kept passing through my life, and no one remained beside me for more than a few years. They appeared out of nowhere, and then just as quickly vanished, and I knew I would most likely never see them again. I recalled Lermontov’s words about ‘the ardour of the soul, squandered in the desert’. They brought me a bit of comfort.

Before leaving, I visited my favourite places in Moscow one last time. From Noevsky Gardens I looked out at the Kremlin. A thunderstorm was gathering overhead. The domes of the Kremlin cathedrals smouldered with a dark fire, the wind from the approaching storm tore at the red flags, lightning sparked and flashed, illuminating an enormous yellow bank of clouds from deep inside. Suddenly, as though bursting from the crowded city, thunder rolled across the sky. The clouds opened up, and rain crashed down into the streets.

I took shelter in the empty conservatory. A single vase with a flowering pelargonium had been left behind on one of the shelves. It didn’t look well. It was stretching all its leaves and flowers towards the air and rain falling on the other plants that had been taken outside. I took it down off the shelf and placed it next to the other plants. Battered by the raindrops, it shuddered and then seemed to come back to life right before my eyes. For some reason the memory of that plant in the conservatory stayed with me. It was one of my last impressions of Moscow. I left not knowing what lay ahead of me, never suspecting, of course, that I would be gone from Moscow for five long years or that my life would be so much like fiction that I would find it hard to describe.

So far in this work I have written only about things that I have seen and heard myself. For this reason, there are a great many important events I haven’t mentioned. My intention is to speak as a witness, and I have no desire to write here in these pages, nor could I if I did, a general history of these revolutionary years. I began writing this story of my life a long time ago. I am old now, and still I have only managed to bring my story up to the time of my early manhood. I don’t know whether I will be able to finish it. If I were ten years younger, I might write another, more interesting, story of my life – not about my life as it was but as it could have, and should have, been had its arrangement depended solely on me and not on a host of external and often hostile circumstances. It would be a story of what never happened, of all the things that ruled my heart and soul, of a life that gathered all the colour, light and excitement of the world into itself. I can see many chapters of that book as clearly as though I had lived them several times over.

[1] Pavlo Skoropadskyi (1873–1945), Ukrainian aristocrat, general in the Russian Imperial Army, hetman of Ukraine in 1918.

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The Riga–Orël Goods Wagon

Ever since childhood I've been in love with railways. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that my father worked on them. Not surprisingly, my love in those days expressed itself in childish ways. Whenever our family passed the summer holidays near a railway station, I spent hours there meeting and seeing off every single train together with the station guard in his red cap. Even now, every last thing about railways still has for me the poetry of travel about it, all the way down to the smell of the coal smoke from the engine.

I would watch with amazement as the oily, green locomotive, its shiny pistons churning ever slower, came to a stop near the water tower and released a great, whistling stream of steam into the sky as though panting from exertion. I could see before my eyes the engine's iron breast piercing fierce winds, the dark of night and dense forests, making its way through the flowering wilderness of the earth, its whistle echoing far from the tracks, perhaps all the way to some cottage in the woods where a little boy like myself was imagining the fiery express racing through the barren night, and a fox, its paw raised, watched it from a distance and yelped with an inexpressible pain – or perhaps with joy.

After the passenger train pulled out, the station sank back into a drowsy silence. The hot boredom of the station reclaimed its rightful place. Warm water dripped from the green tub on the platform. Impudent hens strutted back and forth over the rails. The flowering tobacco plants closed themselves to wait for evening. The glare from the rails, polished by the wheels of hundreds of carriages, was blinding. Tethered to the back of a goods wagon standing on the sidings, a chestnut mare slept. Now and then the skin on her back twitched to shake off the persistent flies.

Then a trembling, piercing whistle was heard in the distance. This was a non-stop goods train. Beyond the station, the tracks curved in a big, wide arc before disappearing into the pine woods. The trains always exploded out of the woods unexpectedly, twisting and leaning on the curve. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The train flew into the station at full speed, pouring thick steam, and swept past, a rush of clanking metal, pounding wheels and tornadoes of dust. It made my head spin. I sometimes thought the train was about to take flight, to leave the rails and pull all of us off the platform and up into the air in its wake like so many dried leaves. The first to go, naturally, would be the station guard in his red cap.

The goods trains flashed by so fast it hurt my eyes, but sometimes I managed to read the white letters painted on their sides that indicated the various rail lines: RO (Riga–Orël), MKV (Moscow– Kiev–Voronezh), SW (South-West), SPBW (St Petersburg–Warsaw), RU (Ryazan–Urals), PRIV (Privislinskaya line), MVR (Moscow– Vindavo–Rybinsk), SV (Syzran–Vyazma), MKhS (Moscow– Kharkov–Sevastopol) and dozens more. Occasionally, I saw some I didn't know – USS or SPBS – and then I'd ask my father and he'd tell me that that was the Ussurskaya line in the Far East or the St Petersburg–Sestroretsk line, a short stretch of tracks that ran north from the old capital along the Gulf of Finland. I envied those inanimate carriages because they never knew where they would be sent next – perhaps to Vladivostok, and from there to Vyatka, and on to Grodno, Feodosia and then the little station of Navlya in the heart of the dense Bryansk forest.

Were it possible, I would have climbed aboard any one of those goods trains and let it take me away. What lovely days I would have spent on the sidings where goods trains were always getting held up for a few hours. I would have stretched out in the warm grass at the foot of a hill, drunk tea with the station guards at the back of the wagon, bought wild strawberries from the leggy peasant girls, and swum in the cool water of the little river nearby where the yellow water lilies blossomed. Once under way, I would have sat dangling my legs in the open doors of the wagon, the wind, warmed by the earth, hitting me in the face, as the long, running shadow of the train raced over the fields and the sun, like a golden shield, sank into the hazy distance of the Russian plain that rolled on and on, leaving behind its wine-gold trace on the burnt-out sky.

I recalled my childhood love of goods trains as I walked up and down the sidings at Bryansky station searching for wagon number 717 802 of the Riga–Orël railway line.

I found my fellow travellers, the Petrograd journalists, already inside. They had fixed themselves up in

comfort and were having tea around a table made from an upturned crate and telling elegantly bawdy jokes. They paid no attention to me, barely returned my greeting, and made it quite clear they wanted nothing to do with me. Why, I wondered, did they ever even agree to take me with them? I racked my brain in search of an answer. Was it really just so that if they ran into trouble with the authorities, they could save their own necks by offering up mine? Their papers were all in order, but you never knew – the authorities were unpredictable and always looking for any excuse. In that case, somebody like me, with no travel pass or exit visa, would be a godsend. I was the perfect foil for them to play the role of loyal subjects of the Soviet government: 'Dear Comrades, why are you picking on us, honest Soviet people, while this shady character without any documents has wormed his way into our wagon? It's our duty to report the man. You should search him.'

I drove these thoughts away. I was ashamed of them. Five years ago I never would have thought so poorly of people I didn't know. Nevertheless, I couldn't get over my mistrust of these rather free and easy journalists. I was especially disgusted by a short man with round, oily eyes. He went by the name Andrei Borelli, but this was, of course, only a pseudonym he used for his sensational scoops in the papers. Among themselves, his fellow journalists called him Dodya. He was constantly hitching up his short khaki trousers and guffawing. Every time he laughed, he launched a shower of spit. The spongy, ashen skin of his face looked like rubber. He couldn't stop making stupid puns and wisecracks which he delivered with a disgusting leer. Soviet Russia he called 'Sovdepia',[1] Moscow was 'the ancient Red Navel' and the Bolsheviks 'Comrade Bookbinders'. Even the leader of this corrupt gang – the jaundiced journalist in the grey spats – got fed up with him at times and snapped: 'You've got a real genius for verbal fornication, Dodya. Stop your screwing around. We're all sick and tired of it!'

'If it's white, you hate it with all your might, if it's red, you love it until you're dead,' Dodya shot back without stopping to think.

At this point Grey Spats would threaten to toss Dodya from the train, and for a minute or two he would stop his twaddle. The night passed without incident.

The train was barely dragging itself along. I didn't bother talking with my travel companions and was trying to think up an excuse to move to a different wagon. But it wasn't possible. The others were full either of heavily armed Red Army soldiers and sailors from the Baltic fleet or of cavalry horses. The next day I noticed something quite odd. Strapped to Dodya's suitcase was a heavily chipped and dented blue enamel teapot. What struck me as strange was that at every stop the journalists went to fetch boiling water with a big tin mug – not the larger teapot – even though the mug didn't hold nearly enough water for all of them. The riddle was unexpectedly solved the following day. The train pulled haltingly into the station at Bryansk. A soldier from the wagon next to ours stuck his head in the door.

'Mates, we're in a bit of trouble,' he said. 'Fools that we are, we somehow managed to lose our teapot along the way. Government issue, no less! Enough to make you cry! You don't happen to have a spare, do you?'

'Nope!' snapped Dodya. 'We've been drinking out of a mug ourselves.'

'You've got an enamelled one right there, strapped to your case,' the soldier said good-naturedly. 'Let us have it for the day. I promise to give it back safely.'

'No, you can't have this teapot,' said Grey Spats, his pince-nez flashing angrily.

The soldier looked hurt. 'Why not?' he asked. 'Is it made of gold or something?'

'It leaks, that's why. Get it? It leaks. It's useless. Full of holes.'

A knowing grin spread over the soldier's face. 'Aren't you a strange group!' he said, as good-naturedly as before. 'Can't imagine why you'd be dragging such trash around with you. It'd be one thing if you all were poor, but that's clearly not it. Here you are putting real sugar in your tea – no saccharine for you. Oh well, sorry for troubling you.'

The soldier left. My companions looked at each other, and then one of them hissed at Dodya: 'Cretin! Did you have to leave your teapot sticking out like a sore thumb?'

I heard some low-voiced grumbling, and then they put a box on top of the suitcase and laid a coat over that.

'Which wagon?' someone asked outside. They didn't sound pleased. 'This one?'

'Yes, Comrade Commissar. That one – from the Riga–Orël line.'

Dodya dived for the teapot, grabbed it, placed it on his lap, and then, straining so hard his eyes began to fill with tears, snapped the tin spout off and stuck it in his pocket. Just then an elderly, disgruntled commissar pulled himself up with a groan into the wagon followed by the soldier.

'What's all this business about a teapot?' asked the commissar. 'Where is it? Let me see.'

Dodya pulled the broken teapot out from under the box.

'Well, look here – the spout's gone!' said the soldier. He gave a whistle. 'Here a moment ago and now

it's flown off somewhere, just like a little bird.'

The commissar looked at the teapot, thought for a moment, and then said to the soldier: 'All right then, go and fetch two of the security guards.'

He turned to the journalists. 'Your documents.'

The journalists readily retrieved their documents, but their hands were shaking. The commissar waited patiently. He looked them over slowly and then placed them in his jacket pocket.

'Our documents are all in order, Comrade Commissar,' said Grey Spats. 'Why are you taking them?'

'I see they're in order,' the commissar answered before turning to me with an expectant look.

'Comrade Commissar, there's something you should know,' Grey Spats spoke up again. 'This citizen turned up in our wagon in Moscow, even though we told him to leave. As far as we know, he doesn't have a travel permit or an exit visa. He's the one you should be checking. As loyal Soviet citizens, we were planning on reporting him to you but simply didn't have a chance.'

'And how exactly did you, loyal Soviet citizens that you all are, come to the conclusion that he doesn't have a permit or visa? Do you know him?'

'No, not at all.'

'To slander him, you need to know him,' the commissar instructed. 'And we know all about persons who like to hide diamonds in the spouts of teapots. We usually catch about five of them a week. You need to be creative in such matters. Creative, you hear me?' The commissar rapped on the teapot with his knuckles. 'And so, my good citizens, follow me. Let's go and have a little talk. You can leave your things here for now. Sidorov, Yershikov,' he said to two armed Red Army soldiers standing by the wagon, 'take them to my office. This one' – here he pointed at me – 'we can leave for the time being. And make sure they don't throw anything out of their pockets on the way. Understood?'

'Yes, sir!' they replied. 'This isn't the first time, Comrade Commissar.'

The journalists were led away followed by the commissar. I remained alone in the wagon. It wasn't long before the soldiers returned and took the journalists' things. I waited. An hour passed. From a nearby agitprop wagon, a sleepy-looking man, barefoot and shirtless and sporting a huge, tousled mane of hair and beard, climbed down. He dragged out after him a sheet of plywood, some brushes and cans of paint, propped the wood up against the wagon, spat on his hands, grabbed a brush and with a single stroke drew a fat man in a black top hat. Money poured from the man's belly, which had been slit open by a bayonet. The bushy man scratched the back of his head and then wrote in red down one side of the plywood: 'The bourgeois belly, fat with gold, Never expected a strike so bold.'

The sailors in the neighbouring wagon howled with laughter. He paid them no attention, sat down on the wagon's steps and began rolling a thick *makhorka* cigarette. Just then a soldier appeared and told me to follow him to the commissar's office. This would be my end. I grabbed my suitcase and off we went. His office was in a coach that stood in a siding overgrown with dandelions. A shiny new machine-gun stood in the door. The commissar was sitting and smoking at a table made from a few rough boards. He looked at me thoughtfully for a long time.

'Let me hear it, every last bit,' he finally said. 'Where are you heading and for what reason? And let me see your documents as well.'

I realised I had to come clean. I told him about the troubles I had had trying to get a visa. 'And as for documents, the most important one I have is this letter,' I said, placing Galya's letter on the table in front of him. 'I am afraid I don't have any others.'

The commissar frowned and began to slowly read the letter. As he read, he glanced up at me from time to time. Then he folded the letter, placed it back in the envelope, and handed it to me.

'The document is clearly authentic,' he said. 'Do you have identification on you?'

I handed him my only identity card.

'Have a seat,' he said, and then pulled out a form with an official stamp and carefully filled it in, looking now and then at my card.

'Here you are!' he said at last, handing me the form. 'Here's your exit visa!'

'Thank you,' I said, overcome with emotion. My voice cracked. I couldn't believe my luck.

'There, there!' the commissar said, embarrassed. He stood up and patted me on the shoulder. 'Best not to get upset. My compliments to your dear mother. From Commissar Anokhin, Pavel Zakharovich, tell her. She must be a remarkable woman. To think of walking all the way to Moscow.'

He stretched out his hand. I shook it firmly but couldn't get a word out. He straightened his belt and his holstered Mauser and said: 'We'll have to liquidate that little runt with the diamonds in the teapot. But we've let the others go. I've ordered you to be moved to a different wagon. You can't be riding with those types. Well, farewell. And don't forget to give your mother my compliments.'

I walked out in a daze. I could barely hold back my tears. The soldier leading me noticed. 'I'd die twice

for a commissar like him,' he said. 'He's a worker from Petrograd, from the Obukhov Factory. Remember his name – Anokhin, Pavel Zakharovich. You might just meet him again.'

They took me to a wagon with only two people in it – an elderly singer and a skinny, talkative boy named Vadik. He was clumsy and simple-hearted, but kind. Both of them were travelling from Petrograd – the singer to his only daughter, a doctor in Vinnitsa, and Vadik to his mother in Odessa. Vadik had left Odessa to spend the winter holidays with his grandfather in 1917 and got stuck there for a year and a half. He found the whole thing a marvellous adventure. We travelled without any further incidents to the station at Zërnovo (Seredyna-Buda), which at the time marked the frontier between Russia and Ukraine.

We stopped at a halfway halt on the edge of a forest the night before reaching Zërnovo. The Bryansk forests stretched off to the north from here, and nearby were all the wonderful places I had often visited as a child. I couldn't sleep. The singer and I hopped down out of our wagon and went for a walk down a dirt road that took us along the edge of the woods and out into some dark fields. Summer lightning flashed low over the swaying grain. We sat on an old elm blown down by a storm at the side of the road. These massive dead elms, lying alone among the fields and meadows, always reminded me for some reason of tough old men in homespun tunics, their grey beards blowing in the wind. The singer said after a silence: 'Everyone believes in Russia in their own way, and for their own reasons.'

'What are yours?'

'I'm a singer. So you can imagine what mine are.' He was quiet for a while and then began to sing, sorrowfully and slowly:

> I walk out alone onto the road,
> Through the fog the stony path shines.
> The night is quiet, the wilderness hearkens to God,
> And overhead star speaks to star.

I have long believed this poem of Lermontov's to be the greatest work in all Russian poetry.[2] And despite his saying that he had neither hope for the future nor regret for the past, it was obvious that Lermontov said all this precisely because he did regret the past and he did expect life to grant him a few fleeting, even if illusory, moments of happiness.

The wind stirred the fields. The agitated corn waved with a scattering whisper. The lightning flashed brighter, and the thunder groaned drowsily in the distance. We walked back to the station. I picked a handful of grass as we made our way through the darkness, and only in the morning did I notice that it was scented clover, what is for me the most precious of all Russian flowers.

[1] A derogatory name for the early Soviet state from the Russian *Sovet Narodnykh Deputatov* – the Soviet of People's Deputies.

[2] First stanza of Lermontov's poem 'I walk out Alone on to the Road' (1841), set to music by composer Yelizaveta Shashina (1805–1903) in 1861.

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The Neutral Zone

Our train arrived at Zërnovo in the morning. The frontier patrol went through the train, checking our exit visas. Our wagon and several others were uncoupled from the train and an old shunting engine dragged us towards the border, an area called the 'Neutral Zone'. The doors to our wagon were kept closed and a few Red Army soldiers with rifles stood guard.

At last the train came to a stop, and we got out. The wagons stood in the middle of a dry field near a track watchman's hut. The wind had kicked up the dust. A few peasant carts stood by the barrier. Their drivers – old men with whips – cried out to us: 'Who's heading to the other side, to Ukraine? Come on over!'

'Is it far?' I asked an old man with a thin beard.

'Not at all! Three versts from here and you can already see the Germans. Let's go!'

We piled our luggage on the cart and walked along beside it. The rest of the carts followed us. At the rear I saw the journalists from the Riga–Orël line. They were walking behind their cart and talking in loud, happy voices. Dodya wasn't with them. Grey Spats looked wildly out of place amid the fields, the swirling dust on the road and the wind-blown nut trees in the gullies. Once we had gone about a kilometre, he stopped, turned to the north to face Russia, shook an angry fist at her and then cursed to high heaven. The driver gave him a frightened look and then shook his head.

I think I mentioned somewhere that my mother believed in the law of retribution. No base, inhuman or cruel act, she liked to say, went unpunished. Sooner or later, retribution would come. I always laughed at my mother's superstitions, but that day I myself almost came to share her belief in the law of retribution.

The road dropped into a hollow overgrown with brush. Our driver became nervous and urged on his old nag. We had reached the bottom of the hollow and started up the other side when out of the scrub stepped a man in a tall astrakhan hat and dusty violet riding breeches. He held a Mauser in one hand. Two bandoliers with cartridges formed a cross over his chest. Several young men in greatcoats, pea-jackets and embroidered Ukrainian shirts followed close behind. They were armed with sawn-off shotguns and swords, and some of them had 'little lemons' – hand-grenades – dangling from their belts. The man in the violet breeches raised his Mauser and fired in the air. The carts stopped immediately.

'Who let you pass?' he demanded.

'The frontier patrol,' Grey Spats replied nervously. The man in the violet breeches was standing right next to the journalists' cart.

'They must've been staring into their *own* pockets!' he yelled. 'But did they bother to inspect *your* things?'

'Yes, they did.'

'And your documents?'

'Yes.'

'I say it again, they must've been staring into their *own* pockets! Right then, have at it, boys!'

The young men began throwing the luggage onto the ground. Grey Spats screamed. The man in the violet breeches smashed him in the mouth with the butt of his Mauser. 'Want some more?' he asked. 'Then shut up, you bourgeois scum, or I'll put a hole in that hat of yours.'

Grey Spats clutched a bloodied handkerchief to his mouth and lay stretched out in the dirt fumbling for his broken pince-nez. The men started slitting the leather suitcases open with their swords. They did it neatly and skilfully – two quick slashes, criss-cross. Apparently, there wasn't enough time to break the locks and open the cases. They worked fast and kept glancing over towards the Soviet frontier. Our driver surreptitiously nudged his horse and moved his cart forward a few steps. The men were pulling things out of the suitcases, holding the shirts and sheets up to the light, taking what struck their fancy and tossing the rest in the dirt.

'They're distracted,' the driver whispered to us. 'Walk up ahead slowly, up to that bush. There's a bend there, and we'll be out of sight. I'll move on ahead real quiet like and maybe they won't notice.'

We walked on past the bush, and the driver nudged his horse forward a few paces at a time. He gave

his horse a good smack with the whip once he caught up with us, and as soon as it was over the rise the horse took off at a gallop. We started to run and after a few minutes we caught up with the cart where the driver had come to a stop.

We lit cigarettes and the driver told us that a certain 'Ataman Kozyuba' and his gang robbed everyone trying to cross through the Neutral Zone. They were mostly after gold and jewels. They had to work fast because even though the Soviet border patrols were not supposed to enter the Neutral Zone, sometimes they crossed over and attacked the bandits. The patrols mercilessly shot everyone they captured. We stood there smoking, all of us glum, even though we had managed to escape the bandits.

The road wound along a clearing dotted with tree stumps. The sun was going down. Its reddish rays lit the crowns of the few remaining pines. I walked along lost in thought. Suddenly, I jumped at the sound of a harsh, metallic shout: '*Halt!*'

Two German soldiers in dark greatcoats and steel helmets stood in the middle of the road. One of them was holding our driver's mangy horse by the bridle. The Germans demanded to see my entry permit. I didn't have one. One of them, rather stocky, guessed at my plight from the look on my face. He walked over to me, pointed in the direction of Russia and yelled: '*Zurück!*'

'Give him five tsarist roubles,' said the driver. 'That should get rid of the bastard. Then we can drive on to Mikhailovsky's farm.'

I held out my hand with a ten-rouble note.

'No! No!' the soldier shouted, shaking his head and looking annoyed.

'What are you doing giving him a tenner?' the driver asked, angrily. 'I told you to give him five. That's the only thing they'll take. It's because for years tsarist five-rouble notes were printed in Germany.'

I gave the soldier the five roubles. He put a finger to his helmet and waved at us to get moving. '*Fa-ahr!*' he shouted.

We went on. I turned round. The Germans, their legs spread wide and their sturdy boots planted in the sandy road, were laughing and smoking. The sun glinted off their helmets. I felt a lump in my throat. I was overcome with the sensation that Russia was no more, everything was lost and there was nothing left to live for.

The singer seemed to guess what I was thinking and said: 'Dear God, what's become of Russia? It's like some horrible dream.'

Vadik also stopped and looked at the Germans, his lips began to quiver and he broke down sobbing like a little child.

'Never mind, lad,' the driver muttered. 'Someday, probably not soon, but someday, we'll pay them back.' He shook the reins, and the cart creaked on through the deep red sand marked by the Germans' steel-shod boots. To the north, where we had left Russia behind, evening's pink haze was thickening over the clearing. Purple clover grew in clumps along the roadside. For some reason, this made me feel better. We'll have to see who wins, I told myself. We'll just have to see.

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Our Rag-Tag Hetman

I stayed in Kopan until late autumn, when I moved to Kiev to find work and lodgings in preparation for bringing Mama and Galya to live with me. It took a while. Eventually, I landed a job as a proofreader for the city's one fairly respectable newspaper, *Kievan Thought*. The paper had known better days. Korolenko had written for it, as had Lunacharsky and other progressive figures. Even under the Germans and the Hetman, *Kievan Thought* tried to maintain an independent line, though not always successfully. The authorities fined it constantly and several times threatened to close it down.

I rented two small rooms from an overly sensitive Swiss spinster, Amalia Knoster, in a modest house near St Vladimir's Cathedral. I was not able to bring Mama and Galya to Kiev, however, for at that moment the city was besieged by Petlyura's forces.[1] My windows looked out onto the Botanical Gardens. I awoke one morning to the sound of cannon fire which ceaselessly swept the entire perimeter of the city. I got up, lit the stove, looked out at the gardens where the gunfire was knocking the hoar-frost off the trees, and then went back to bed to read and think. The icy winter morning, the crackle of the burning logs in the stove, the booming of the guns – all this induced in me an unusual and precarious but nevertheless undeniable peace of mind. My head felt clear. I washed in the icy water from the tap. For some reason the smell of coffee coming from Frau Knoster's room brought back memories of Christmas Eve.

I began to write a great deal at the time. Strange as it may seem, the siege helped. The city was held in a tight ring, and so were my thoughts. The realisation that Kiev was cut off from the world, that no one could get out, that the siege was likely to last a long time, and that there was nothing to do now but wait, made life somehow easier and more carefree. Even Frau Knoster became accustomed to the cannonade as a regular feature of daily life. When it occasionally stopped, she grew fidgety and nervous. Silence foretold something new and unexpected and, hence, dangerous. But soon the low thunder ringing the city started up again, and everyone relaxed. You could read again, or think, or work and return to the familiar cycle of normal life: of waking up, work, starvation (or, more accurately, half-starvation) and finally blissful sleep.

I was Amalia's sole lodger. She let rooms only to single men, although without any devious intentions. It was simply that she couldn't stand most women. She quietly fell in love with every one of her lodgers, although she expressed this through nothing more than extra care and concern or sudden, deep blushes. These would flood her long sallow face at the uttering of any word that might possibly be construed as a subtle reference to the dangerous realm of love and marriage. She loved to talk about all her former lodgers and was sincerely disappointed when they became engaged, as if by conspiracy, to some cruel and greedy woman and moved out. Amalia had been a governess to rich Kiev families, saved some money and rented her present flat. She earned a living by letting rooms and sewing.

Despite her former profession as a governess, there was nothing stiff or prim about Amalia. She was simply a kind, boring and lonely woman. Amalia hated the Germans occupying Kiev and considered them boors. She treated me with an air of timid sympathy, apparently because I tended to read and write at night. She considered me a writer and from time to time even got up the courage to talk to me about literature and her favourite writer, Spielhagen. She cleaned my room herself, and sometimes I would come back to find a sprig of dried flowers or a picture postcard of a brilliant dahlia left between the pages of one of my books. But there was never anything intrusive about these little acts of kindness, and nothing ever interfered with our friendship.

Her friends – elderly German and Swiss governesses in gaiters and capes with satin ribbons, reticules in their hands – came to visit on feast days. Amalia put out a pile of napkins embroidered with kittens, puppies, pansies and forget-me-nots, spread these treasures on the table and served her famous Basel coffee (her family originally came from there). The governesses ate and drank daintily and carried on a conversation that consisted entirely of exclamations of astonishment or horror. Only one man was admitted to this select company – our house superintendent, a clerk for the South-West Railway. He had a most luxurious name: Pan Sebastian Kturenda-Tsikavsky.

He was a cocky little man with a crew-cut, the dyed moustache of a pimp and insolent little button

eyes. He dressed in a navy-blue jacket with brown stripes cut for a much smaller man and had sewn to his breast pocket a strip of purple silk that was meant to act as a symbolic replacement for a missing and presumably fashionable handkerchief. He was fond of bow-ties and the pink celluloid collars that were then referred to as 'bachelor's luck'. There was no way to wash them and so his collars were always dirty. The only way to get the dirt out was to rub them with an ordinary schoolboy's rubber. Pan Kturenda gave off a complex aroma of hair dye, stale tobacco and hooch, which he distilled himself in his own dimly lit room. Kturenda was a bachelor and lived with his mother, a timid old woman who was afraid of her son and especially of his learning. Pan Kturenda loved to impress the lodgers with it as well, always in the most florid language.

'I have the privilege of informing you', he liked to say mysteriously, 'that Weininger's *Sex and Character* is the formulation of the sexual question in its most articulate of expressions.' Pan Kturenda never broached the subject of sex in his conversations with Frau Amalia, but he made the governesses quiver with his accounts of the divine origins of 'the Most Noble Pan Hetman Skoropadskyi'. I have seen many fools in my life, but nothing to compare with the likes of this idiot.

Life in Kiev at the time reminded one of a feast in a time of plague.[2] Many coffee houses and restaurants had sprung up, although none of them had enough sweets and food for even a dozen or so patrons. Still, they made an impression of shabby wealth. The population had nearly doubled in size from the influx of a great many Muscovites and Petrograders. Artsybashev's *Jealousy*[3] and Viennese operettas played in the theatres. German uhlans with lances and red and black pennants patrolled the streets. The newspapers carried little news about events in Soviet Russia. It was a touchy subject. The editors decided it was best to ignore such matters. There was no harm in letting readers think that life there was just fine.

Ox-eyed Kievan beauties and the Hetman's officers roller-skated arm in arm on the city's rinks. Gambling dens and brothels opened left and right. At the Bessarabsky Market, cocaine was sold openly and passers-by were accosted by prepubescent prostitutes. No one had any idea what was happening at the local factories and in the workers' suburbs. The Germans didn't feel secure, especially after the murder of General Eichhorn. One got the impression Kiev was determined to enjoy itself during the blockade. As for Ukraine, it was as though it didn't even exist. Nothing beyond the ring of Petlyura's men seemed real.

Some evenings I walked over to an arts club on Nikolaevskaya Street. Poets, singers and dancers who had fled from the north performed on a restaurant stage. Loud drunks liked to interrupt the long-winded poetry readings. It was hot and stuffy inside, even in winter, and so the windows were often opened a crack. Together with the frosty air, snow would blow into the brightly lit room, land and immediately melt. With the windows ajar, the nightly sound of the guns became more apparent.

One evening Vertinsky sang.[4] I had never heard him perform before. I still remembered him as a schoolboy who wrote exquisite verses. It was snowing unusually hard that evening, and the flakes twirled round and round in the air, drifting all the way to the piano where they caught the multi-coloured lights of the chandelier. Petlyura's guns were getting closer now. Their thundering made the glasses on the tables ring. The troubling sound of the glassware seemed to be sending us a warning signal, but everyone carried on smoking, arguing, making toasts and laughing. A young woman in a black evening dress with narrow eyes that reminded me somehow of Egypt had the most infectious laugh of all that night. Snowflakes were landing on her exposed back, and with each one she shivered and quickly turned round as if she wanted to see it melt, but by then it was already too late.

Vertinsky came out onto the stage in a black tail-coat. He was tall, thin and terribly pale. The room fell silent. The waiters stopped serving and formed a line at the back. Vertinsky twisted his long slender fingers together, held them out in front of him in an air of great suffering, and started to sing. He sang of the Cadets recently killed outside Kiev in the village of Borshchagovka, of the youths sent to a certain death against a dangerous gang. 'I don't know, who wanted this or why? What merciless hand sent these boys off to die?'

He sang of the Cadets' funeral. Vertinsky ended with the words:

> Mourners huddled silently, shivering in their coats,
> A woman, her frenzied face hidden behind a hand,
> Bent down and kissed the cold blue lips of a corpse
> And flung at the priest her wedding band.

He was singing of an actual incident that had happened at the Cadets' funeral. The audience applauded. Vertinsky bowed. A drunken officer seated at a table in the back blurted out: 'Sing "God Save the Tsar"!'

The room erupted. A wizened old man who looked like a school-teacher in a pince-nez and a coat shiny with age rushed at the officer. His pointy little beard shaking with rage, the man began pounding the marble-topped table with his bony fists and showering the officer with spittle as he screamed: 'Riff-raff ! Vermin! You and all the other officers! How dare you insult the people of Free Russia! Why aren't you at the front fighting the Bolsheviks? Just another paper tiger!'

Everyone jumped up. The old man threw himself at the officer, but some patrons pulled him away. Red in the face, the officer slowly stood up, kicked away his chair and grabbed a bottle by the neck. The waiters rushed over to him. The woman in the black dress screamed and covered her face with her hands. Vertinsky banged a loud chord on the piano and raised a hand. The noise stopped. 'Ladies and Gentlemen!' he said in a clear and contemptuous voice, 'This is just too tiresome!' With that, he turned and slowly walked off the stage.

The man in the pince-nez had been served a glass of water. As if nothing had happened, the officer sat back down and said to no one in particular: 'I've beaten Yids all my life and I'll go on beating Yids until the day I die. I'll show you what officers' scum is, Master Movshenzon from Gomel-Gomel.'

The room erupted once more. A patrol of the Hetman's Cossack guards with blue and yellow armbands appeared in the restaurant. I left. As I walked, I cursed under my breath. Our country was over-flowing with all kinds of riff-raff – be they in officers' epaulettes, pink celluloid collars or heavy German helmets – but I couldn't pretend to have done anything about it. I spent my days writing, that was it. I had been taken prisoner by my imaginary world and was helpless to escape it.

My writings to this point were merely picturesque exercises and useless sketches. They were full of wild imagination, but nothing more. I could spend hours crafting different descriptions of sunshine – the way it flashed on broken glass, or on a ship's brass ladder, on windowpanes, a drinking glass, dew, the mother-of-pearl lining of a shell, a human eye. For me, they came together to form a series of unexpected images. The proper use of imagination demands sharpness, definition, which I rarely achieved. Most of my sketches were blurry. At that time, I wanted to forget real life and so I never did struggle to give my writings the precision of reality.

Eventually, I created my own literary school out of these descriptive sketches. But after reading them over, one after another, I quickly discovered how mawkish and boring they were. It came as a shock. Good prose requires vigour and austerity, and I had been churning out candy floss, Turkish delight and bonbons. They were sticky, these verbal sweets of mine. It was hard to wash them off. I scrubbed and scrubbed, but not always successfully. Traces of this misty, florid prose remained. Thankfully, this phase didn't last long, and I tore up nearly everything I had written. Yet even now, I have to be on guard against my predilection for pretty words.

And then, all of a sudden, my writing and my doubts were interrupted in a most unexpected manner. Petlyura was drawing the noose tighter and tighter around Kiev. In response, Hetman Skoropadskyi issued a decree calling up all men without exception between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. The house superintendents were responsible for making sure every male obeyed, otherwise they would be considered to have been 'hiding' the men and would be shot immediately. The decree was posted throughout the city. I read it matter-of-factly. I considered myself a citizen of the Russian Federative Republic and so not subject to any of the Hetman's decrees, which, to be honest, I had no desire to follow.

Late one winter evening I was returning home along Bibikovsky Boulevard from the printers. A cold wind was blowing. The poplars made a plaintive murmur. A woman muffled in a warm shawl was standing by the gate to my house. She hurried up to me and took my hand. I drew back.

'Quiet!' she said. I recognised Amalia's voice, breathless with emotion. 'Follow me.'

We walked off in the direction of St Vladimir's Cathedral. Hulking buttresses shored up its massive walls. We stopped behind one of the walls to get out of the wind, and even though we were all alone, Amalia spoke in a hurried whisper.

'Thank God you've been out all day. He's been sitting in the front hall since ten o'clock this morning. He hasn't moved once. It's terrible!'

'Who?'

'Pan Kturenda. He's lying in wait for you.'

'Why?'

'Oh Lord!' she cried, raising her hands, hidden in a small muff, to her chest. 'You've got to run! I beg you! Don't go back to your room. I'll give you the address of a friend – one of the kindest old women left on earth. I've written her a letter. Go to her. It's far from here, in Glubochitsa, but you'll be safer there. She lives all alone in a small house and can hide you. I'll bring you food every day until the danger passes.'

‘What’s happened?’ I asked. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Haven’t you read the Hetman’s decree?’

‘Yes, I’ve read it.’

‘Kturenda has come to turn you in. To hand you over to the army.’

Only now did I understand.

‘He’s crying,’ Amalia said coldly. ‘He’s soaked in tears and keeps saying that if you run off he’ll be shot like a common bandit tomorrow morning at ten.’ She pulled a letter from her muff and placed it in the pocket of my coat. ‘Go!’

‘Thank you, Amalia Karlovna! I’m in no danger. I’m a citizen of the Russian Federation. I don’t give a damn about the Hetman’s decrees.’

‘Oh Lord, that’s wonderful,’ she said, ignoring my crude language. She pressed the muff to her chest and laughed. ‘I didn’t know that. So that means they’ll leave him alone as well.’

‘Nothing’s going to happen. I’ll go to the recruiting office with him tomorrow and we’ll settle the matter right then and there.’

‘Well, all right then,’ she said, now completely reassured. ‘Let’s go home. I’ll go in first, and you follow me a few minutes later so he doesn’t suspect anything. Oh, I’m so tired!’

For the first time since we had met, I took her by the arm. I could feel her shaking as we walked. She waited a minute or two on the steps before entering her room. Pan Kturenda was sitting in the front hall. He hurled himself at me, grabbed my arms with his bony claws and muttered in a quivering voice: ‘For the love of Christ, don’t kill me! I’ve been waiting here for you the whole day. Have pity, if not for me, then at least for my poor mama!’

I told him that tomorrow the two of us would visit the recruiting office and since I was a Russian citizen they would of course let me go. Pan Kturenda gave a sob, dropped to his knees and tried to kiss my hand. I snatched it away. Amalia stood in the doorway watching Kturenda with a piercing stare. I had never seen this look in her eyes before. All of a sudden it hit me that if I had followed Amalia’s advice, then this wretched little man might indeed have been shot. I couldn’t help but marvel at the cool ruthlessness of this extraordinarily sensitive woman.

Pan Kturenda went off, calling down blessings on my head and insisting that, of course, I would be exempt because Pan Hetman had no interest in recruiting Reds from Moscow into his army.

After I had washed under the tap in the kitchen, Amalia stopped me in the hall on the way to my room. ‘Not a word!’ she whispered mysteriously, taking me by the hand and tiptoeing across the small sitting room and into the dark front hall. She stopped, pointed at a door, and gently pushed down on my shoulders as a way of telling me to peep through the keyhole. I looked. There sat Pan Kturenda, yawning silently, his mouth covered by a hand, on an egg-crate at the top of the stairs. Clearly, he had not believed me and was making sure I didn’t sneak off in the middle of the night.

‘He’s an animal!’ whispered Amalia when we were back in the sitting room. ‘And to think I used to have him in my house. I hate him so now that the mere sight of him gives me a headache. I’ve left some breakfast for you in the kitchen cupboard.’

At exactly eight o’clock the following morning, Pan Kturenda rang the bell at my door. I opened it. His red eyes were full of tears. The wings of his bow-tie had drooped. He looked pathetic. We walked over to the recruitment office in the Galitsky Market. Pan Kturenda, complaining that he felt dizzy, held me tightly by the arm. It was obvious he was afraid I might try to escape down some dark side street. At the office, we had to stand in a queue. House superintendents, fat ledgers under their arms, were fussing around the recruits. They looked embarrassed and ingratiating and kept offering, or, more accurately, forcing, cigarettes on their charges, nodding foolishly at everything the young men said, and making sure not to leave their side for moment.

One of the Hetman’s officers in yellow and blue epaulettes sat behind a desk at the far end of a room that smelled of coffee. His foot bounced up and down nervously under the desk. Ahead of me was a sickly, unshaven youth in spectacles. He waited quietly, his eyes directed at the floor. When his turn came and the officer asked his profession, he said: ‘Accountant.’

‘A count?’ the officer asked, leaning back in his chair and beaming with pleasure at the young man. ‘That’s a rare bird! I’ve had lots of nobles and even a few barons, but so far no counts.’

‘Not a count, an accountant.’

‘Shut up!’ The officer said matter-of-factly. ‘We’re all counts. And we know all about you counts and accountants. Any more nonsense out of you and you’ll end up in the housekeeping unit.’

The young man just shrugged his shoulders.

‘Next!’

I was next. I showed the officer my documents and said firmly that as a citizen of the Russian Soviet

Federation I could not be called up into the Hetman's army.

'What a surprise!' said the officer, making a face and raising his eyebrows. 'Your words simply delight me. Had I known you planned to grace us with your presence, I would have called for the regimental band.'

'Your jokes really aren't called for.'

'Oh, really? And what is called for? Maybe this?' he asked angrily and stood up. He made an obscene gesture with his hand and shoved it in my face. 'Do you think I give a fig for your Soviet-Jewish citizenship? I couldn't give a damn about it or you.'

'You can't talk to me like this!' I said, trying to stay calm.

'Everybody's always telling me what I can and can't do.' The officer sighed sadly and sat back down. 'That's enough now! Out of my respect for your so-called citizenship, I'm putting you down for the Cossack Infantry Regiment – Pan Hetman's very own life guards. You should thank God for that. Your documents will remain with me. Next!'

During this conversation, Pan Kturenda disappeared. We recruits were marched off under guard to the barracks in Demievka. The whole farce, highlighted by the presence of so many bayonets, was so ludicrous and unbelievable that the seriousness of it didn't hit me until we reached the cold barracks. I sat down on a dusty window-sill, lit a cigarette and thought things over. I was prepared to face any danger or hardship, but not as a soldier in the Hetman's army. I decided to look around for an opportunity to escape. The farce quickly turned bloody. That first night sentries shot and killed two young men from the workers' suburb of Predmostnaya for walking out of the gate and not stopping fast enough when ordered.

The shelling was growing louder. This calmed those of us who had not yet lost the ability to feel anything. It signalled some sort of change, and soon, although whether good or bad no one could say. Not that it mattered. The Ukrainian saying 'It may be worse, but at least it's different' was on everybody's lips in Kiev.

Most of the recruits were so-called motor boys. That's what the hooligans and thieves from Solomenka and Shuliavka – the worst slums on the outskirts of Kiev – were called. They were wild, desperate youths. They were happy to join the Hetman's army. It was clear that its final days were approaching, and the motor boys knew better than anyone that in the coming chaos they would be able to hold onto their weapons and then rob and loot at will and generally raise hell. And so in the meantime the motor boys tried not to arouse the suspicions of the authorities and, as best they could, behave as model soldiers of the Hetman's army. It boasted a grandiloquent title: 'The Cossack Infantry Regiment of His Most Noble and Radiant Highness Pan Pavlo Skoropadskyi'. I was assigned to a regiment under the command of a former Russian airman. We addressed him as 'Pan Sotnik', an old Cossack military term roughly comparable to a captain. He didn't know a word of Ukrainian, other than a few simple commands, and even these he wasn't too sure of. He always had to stop and think for a few moments before saying 'right' or 'left', trying to remember which was which. He was openly contemptuous of the Hetman's army. Sometimes, looking at us, he would shake his head with disgust and say: 'Just look at you, the Shah of Lilliput's army! Nothing but a band of riff-raff and ninnies!'

He spent a few days pretending to teach us how to march, fire our rifles and handle grenades. Then they dressed us in tobacco-coloured greatcoats, caps with the Ukrainian seal, old boots and puttees and got us to parade up and down Kreshchatik Street. They informed us that tomorrow we were being sent to the front against Petlyura's men. Together with a few other units, we marched down Kreshchatik past the city Duma, where as a child I had come under fire. Even now, many years later, the gilded figure of the arch-strategist St Michael still balanced on one foot atop the spire.

In front of the Duma, the Hetman, in a white Circassian coat and a crumpled little Cossack hat, sat astride an English bay, a riding crop in his hand. Arranged behind the Hetman, as still as statues on their dark, gunmetal steeds, were several German generals. They wore helmets with gilded spikes and almost every single one of them had a glinting monocle screwed in place. Thin crowds of curious bystanders had gathered on the pavement. The units marched past, saluting the Hetman with lacklustre cheers of 'Hurrah!' He merely raised his crop to his hat and gave his horse a quick tug on the reins.

Our unit had prepared a little surprise for the Hetman. As soon as we drew even with him, we broke into a jaunty tune:

> Our pride, our joy! Such a fine man!
> That's our rag-tag Pan Hetman!
> To the future, there's just one key,
> No one else but – Pavlo Skoropadskyi!

The motor boys sang with exceptional bravura, adding whistles and a rollicking ‘Ekh!’ at the beginning of each stanza. The boys were angry that we were being sent off to the front so soon and had got a bit out of hand.

Skoropadskyi didn’t bat an eyelid. As calm as ever, he raised his crop to his hat, grinned as though he had heard a clever joke and turned to share the fun with the German generals behind him. An ironic flash of their monocles was the only sign that the generals had got the gist of the song. The crowd on the pavement erupted with laughter.

They woke us up when it was still dark. The unwished-for dawn was nothing more than a pale streak in the east. The sullen morning, the stench of paraffin in the barracks, the weak tea that smelled oddly of salted herring, the quiet despair that filled Pan Sotnik’s faded eyes, the cold, wet boots we could scarcely pull on – all this amounted to such complete and senseless misery, to such enormous, devastating unease, that I decided I had to escape from the Cossack Infantry Regiment of His Most Noble and Radiant Highness Pan Hetman that very day.

At roll call we discovered that twelve men had already deserted. Pan Sotnik shrugged his shoulders and said: ‘To hell with all of you! Fall in!’

We more or less managed to form a line.

‘Forward, march!’ commanded Pan Sotnik. Shivering, we exited the damp and dubious warmth of the barracks into the biting air of the early winter morning.

‘Where exactly is the front?’ a sleepy voice asked with a note of confusion from the rear. ‘Do we really plan to march the whole way?’

‘Ever heard of Madame Tsimkovich’s brothel, over in Priorka? Well, that’s where the front is. It’s the supreme commander’s HQ.’

‘Would you please shut up,’ Pan Sotnik begged. ‘Honest to God, it’s disgusting to listen to you. And besides, you’re not supposed to talk while marching.’

‘We know what we’re supposed to do and what not.’

Pan Sotnik just sighed and moved a few paces away from the men. The truth was, the motor boys frightened him.

‘They sold out Ukraine for a bottle of schnapps,’ said a deep, angry voice. ‘And now we’re the ones forced to wade through this pile of snow and horseshit. It’s a bloody disgrace!’

‘To hell with the lot of ’em, I say!’

‘Who’s “them”?’

‘Them, every last one – Petlyura, and that bastard Hetman and all the rest. All of ’em! Just leave the people in peace.’

‘Hey, Pan Sotnik, what’s the matter with you? Don’t be shy, say something! Tell us, just where is the front?’

‘Just beyond Priorka,’ he replied hesitantly. ‘Near the Voditsa Woods.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa, now you tell us! That’s a good ten versts from here.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Pan Sotnik, ‘we’re going to get a ride.’

The soldiers tittered. ‘On what?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘The tsar’s landau. It’s the least they could do for heroes like us.’

I still don’t know what dull apathy kept us marching on, even though all of us, Pan Sotnik included, understood that there was no good reason for going to the front and that we could just as easily and without any fear of consequences turn round and head home. But we kept on nevertheless, down to Podol and into Kontraktovaya Square. There, a normal, everyday morning had begun – little boys in their grey overcoats were on the way to school, the bells of the Bratsky Bogoyavlensky Monastery summoned the worship-pers, peasant women in boots drove mangy cows to market, barbers opened their filthy shops, and house porters swept the dirty, slushy snow off the pavement. Two old open-decked trams stood on the square.

‘All aboard!’ shouted Pan Sotnik, having suddenly come to life.

In complete shock, the regiment stopped dead in its tracks.

‘You heard me – all aboard!’ he was angry now. ‘I told you transport had been arranged. These are military trams.’

The Cossacks began talking happily among themselves.

‘Now, this is what I call a civilised war!’

‘One of Father Gervasy’s miracles! Heading off to the front on a tram.’

‘Get in, boys, you’re holding us up!’

We quickly climbed in, and the jingling trams trundled off down the cobbled streets of Podol and

through dreary Priorka to the Voditsa Woods. Just beyond Priorka the trams came to a stop. We got out and followed Pan Sotnik, straggling through alleys lined with crooked hovels and snow-bound open spaces dotted here and there with mounds of stinking manure. Up ahead loomed a dark, ancient park. This was the famous park called 'Cheer Up', which I had known so well since my childhood.

On a snow-covered slope near the edge of the park, a network of trenches had been dug, complete with communications, bunkers and foxholes. The Cossacks were unexpectedly pleased with the fox-holes, which provided excellent cover. Pan Sotnik took a bunker for himself, and the motor boys quickly occupied two foxholes. Within minutes they had set up trestle boards and were playing cards.

I stood watch at the observation post. Before me lay a large field and beyond that the pine forest of the Voditsa Woods, now green and thawing out in the warm wind. Petlyura's men took lazy pot-shots at us from there. The bullets whizzed quietly and harmlessly over our heads, now and then smacking into the parapets. Pan Sotnik had forbidden us from showing our heads or returning fire. To the right, a leaden sky hung over the Dnieper, and a dirt track, reddish-brown from manure, led into a wood. To the left, from the direction of Svyatoshino, came the sound of artillery fire. However hard I stared into the woods, I never once saw one of Petlyura's men. If only a bush had stirred, but I didn't even see so much as that. It was boring, standing there. I lit a cigarette. I had recently managed to get hold of three packets of Odessan Salve cigarettes and was quite proud of myself. They were fat, strong and aromatic.

I smoked and, with nothing better to do, thought back over the past few years of my life. They had been full of adventure. I thought it was high time I got serious and dedicated myself to becoming a writer. I was twenty-six, but still hadn't written anything worthwhile – nothing but some vague drafts, sketches and studies. I had to set a goal, make a plan, stop drifting.

I thought I saw something move off to my right, just beyond the dirt track. There was an old cemetery over there. On a grave mound a cross stood leaning to one side. All of a sudden, it seemed strangely familiar somehow–the sullen day and the cross, the thaw in the air and the jackdaws screeching behind me in the dark park, the track covered with manure and rotting straw. The sensation was so powerful I let out a moan. It was exactly three years ago, on a day just like this on a mound just like the one I saw before me, that we had buried Lëlya. Three years that seemed like three decades. Still the same Germans, the same ice and slush, although by now perhaps no trace of her grave was left. Not for a moment could I imagine her bones lying in the ground. I did not believe it possible. It seemed to me that she would lie forever just as she had been when we laid her body in that wooden coffin – pale and indescribably beautiful, peaceful and young, her eyes closed and her lashes casting sad shadows on her cheeks.

There was no one I could ever tell this to, not even Mama. I was condemned to carry this burning pain in my heart. I felt this pain every day and still do, even though I speak of it rarely. Maybe it's pointless to bring it up. Can a writer ever be certain that stony critics or churlish readers won't treat such painful confessions with derisive condescension? Can a writer ever be certain that a confession of one's grief will not be used by others to inflict even more pain?

Still thinking about Lëlya, I lit another cigarette and then, desperate to discharge my sudden anxiety somehow, I pulled the trigger of my rifle. A shot rang out and was answered immediately by a ragged volley from the cemetery, where Petlyura's men had apparently been hiding. My shot must have startled them. Pan Sotnik leapt from his bunker. We opened fire on the cemetery. Our bullets were knocking splinters off the crosses and then we saw some soldiers break cover and run for the woods. The motor boys fired at them as they took flight, whistling and hounding them with curses. In the end, we had repulsed their planned attack.

I was relieved from my post by a bushy-haired student in thick glasses, probably the son of a priest. I went down into a foxhole. A small smoky paraffin lamp gave a bit of light. I pulled some bread and a piece of stale smoked sausage out of my knapsack and started to eat. The duty orderly came over, a little man with bright eyes, white scars all over his face and a tattoo on his hand in the shape of a woman's pursed pair of lips. When he opened his palm, the lips puckered as though ready for a kiss. The tattoo made him enormously popular with the motor boys. He poured me a mug of hot tea, handed me three sugar cubes and patted me on the back, saying: 'Tea by Vysotsky, sugar by Brodsky and Russia – by Trotsky.[5] Right, aren't I?'

Not waiting for an answer, he left and walked over to the gamblers at the trestle board. Cursing and clowning, he sat down and joined in the game. The guns in the direction of Svyatoshino boomed louder and louder. After every explosion, the lamp poured out ever more smoke. Warm and tired, I fell asleep leaning against the wall of the foxhole. I awoke in the middle of the night to the muffled sounds of swearing and commotion. The gamblers were fighting. They were holding the orderly face down on the trestle board and calmly, methodically punching him in the head. He wasn't resisting. No doubt he knew he had earned a beating. Three men were needed for a new duty shift in the trench. The motor boys let

the orderly go, and three of us – the orderly, a tall man in a cavalry greatcoat and myself – made our way over to the trench.

It was warmer now, and the melting snow sounded like mice scurrying around us. The orderly kept up a stream of cursing until the man in the cavalry coat hissed at him angrily: 'Shut your trap or I'll carve you up into little pieces. Got it?'

The orderly spat, moved a bit closer to me, sat back on his haunches, drew a deep breath and said: 'You won't carve me up, chum, I've already done it myself. Made a proper picture of my mug. I've got scars on top of my scars. Haven't you noticed?'

'Yes, I noticed,' I said. I had no interest in talking to this ridiculous man.

'They aren't really scars at all,' he said with unexpected sadness. 'They're a strange tale of love written on my hide. That's how you have to read them.'

He laughed in a curious way, almost as if he were choking. 'I worked some time ago on a Volga steamer that belonged to the Caucasus-Mercury Company. I was a waiter in the restaurant. Well, on one of our trips, a girl who was about to finish gymnasium boarded the boat at Kostroma on her way downriver to Simbirsk. I'd had lots of women by then – shipboard girlfriends mostly. I had an easy way with them. Some men weep, beat their heads against the wall if a woman falls out of love with them. Not me. I took what I wanted and got more than my share. And if some woman had had enough, so what – good riddance, I'd say! The greedy ones always seemed to fall for me. All the women I knew were greedy – either for love or for money. Most of them were waitresses or kitchen maids, young ones . . . Well . . . so this schoolgirl comes aboard and makes her way to the restaurant for some dinner. All on her little lonesome. Pale, beautiful, and by the look of her this was all new to her and made her feel a bit shy. Her plaits were of pure gold, thick and luxurious, pulled back around the nape of her neck. I brushed them with a hand while waiting on her. Sent a shiver right through me – those plaits seemed somehow so cold and springy. I begged her pardon, of course, but she just frowned, glanced at me, said not to worry and then tidied her hair. A proud girl, you could see it.

'Well, I thought, I've had it this time! What really knocked me over was some sort of purity about her, like an apple tree in blossom, you know, sweet-smelling all over. I was hooked. Feelings took hold of my body, I even started moaning. The thought of her getting off at Simbirsk and me stuck on the boat with my damned broken heart was enough to make me want to bash my head against the wall and howl with misery. But I held myself together. I had to be patient – Simbirsk was still two full days away. I made sure to serve her only the best of everything. I even promised the cook a bottle of vodka if he'd add a little extra garnish to her plates. She was young, inexperienced, and didn't notice a thing. She was a young lady, just a girl, to be honest. I tried talking to her, even though this was strictly forbidden. Quick, silent service, and no talking to the fine paying customers – those were our orders. Don't go sticking your dirty mug in where it doesn't belong, heaven forbid! You're a servant, so act like one: "Yes, sir!" "Right away, sir!" "May I take your order, sir?" "Thank you very much, sir." That was for if they tipped you.

'I was having trouble finding a chance to talk to her. The other waiter, Nikodim, was always hovering around. Then I had a bit of luck – Nikodim went off to the kitchen. I asked her immediately: "Miss, where might you be going?" She raised her eyes – they were dark and grey, her lashes as velvety as the night – and said: "Simbirsk. Why?" That "Why" brought me to my knees. "No particular reason," I said. "It's just that since you are travelling alone, I feel I ought to warn you that there all sorts of people on board. One might say dirty people, shameless people, especially when it comes to defenceless young ladies such as yourself." She looked at me and said: "I know." And then she smiled. At that moment I knew that I would give all the blood in my body – drop by precious drop without so much as even a groan – for every one of her smiles.

'I never got another chance to speak to her. I did, however, take the flowers from a couple of the other tables and put them on hers – a small token, I thought, to show her she was dearer to me than all the world. Not that she noticed.

'Just before Simbirsk, Nikodim kicked up a row, and right in front of her too. "What are you doing taking my flowers from the table? Tulips, no less!" She guessed immediately what was going on and blushed but kept her eyes down.

'Believe me when I say I've never before told this story to a soul. You're the first. It's not a thing you can tell the boys. They'll turn it into something dirty, but I swear to you on the life of my old mother, it was the finest thing I've ever known. I may be a crook, an honest-to-God thief if you like, but I'd never stoop so low as to tell this to the gang. Do you believe me?'

'I do. Tell me, what happened in the end?'

'It's not over yet,' he said, and then repeated himself in an unexpectedly threatening voice: 'It's not over yet! That's what I believe. And you've got no right to put doubts in my head. Stop trying to confuse

me. So . . . we were supposed to arrive at Simbirsk the next morning, and you wouldn't guess what I was thinking. I now knew for certain that I couldn't bear to be parted from her. Whether from afar, or on the sly, I had to follow her until my dying day. I didn't need much. Just to breathe the air around her would be enough, for any other air was poison for me. Can you believe this? You've read books about love – this kind of thing has to be in there. Well, that night I worked out a nice plan in my head. While it was still dark, I stole the takings from the restaurant's cash box and as soon as we tied up at Simbirsk, I hopped ashore still dressed in my waiter's outfit as if I were on my way to buy some radishes. Except I never came back.

'My clothes looked suspicious, but since I had some money, I was able to buy myself a jacket. You can bet I tracked her down. To my good fortune, just across from the house where she was living with her grandmother – an old kind of place with a garden and goose-berry bushes – there was an inn. It was small and rundown, didn't even have a canary singing in a cage. I took a seat and made myself comfortable. I made up a story about how I was waiting for a friend to buy some geese from him in Simbirsk. The man was obviously late. What I didn't know myself at the time, you never buy geese in summer, only in autumn.'

'Well, did you see her?' I asked.

'I did. Twice. She waltzed right through my soul and took everything with her. I had no idea what was happening, but I did know this: I was happy. She didn't suspect a thing, of course, and had no doubt already forgotten all about me. I know, I'm not much to look at – got the teeth of a ferret and the eyes of a rat. What's more, one eye goes one way, the other another. Damned things. Might as well tear them out. Nope, you can't buy or steal beauty, try all you will.'

A Petlyura machine-gun fired a lazy burst from the edge of the woods and then went quiet.

'This is all nonsense,' he said. 'The Hetman, Petlyura. And all this fuss and running about. I have no idea what the point of it is, and I don't care to find out.'

He was silent for a while. I said: 'Well, go on. Since you've started, don't stop.'

'I'm not going to. I'd been in Simbirsk no more than ten days when the innkeeper – a kind but sickly sort – took me aside and said in a whisper: "The police have been nosing around here, asking about you. Careful, young fellow, they don't catch you. You a thief ?" "No, I'm no thief and I never would have been if it hadn't been for the love of a woman." "Well, the court won't take love into account. It's not in the book. You'd better not come around here anymore. Look out for yourself." And I decided – nope, no jail for me. I had to be free as a bird if I wasn't going to lose my woman. I had to give them the slip, cover my tracks.

'So, I left for Syzran that very day to lie low, but they caught up with me like a sitting duck just three days later. They took me by boat to Samara under the watch of two armed guards. We were approaching Simbirsk. I looked out of the porthole and could see that very house and garden where she lived. I asked the guards: "I haven't eaten in two days, would you mind bringing me up to the third-class buffet?" Well, they felt bad for me so they took me there. I softly asked the barmaid if I might have a glass of vodka. She poured me one. I drained it in one gulp, then smashed the glass, and began tearing at my face with the jagged pieces still in my hand. It was like I was washing my face with the bloody shards. Because of my unbearable anguish. The whole counter was covered in blood. Ever since I've worn these scars on my mug. Made me that much prettier.'

'And then what?' I asked.

He looked at me and spat. 'As if you don't know. And then . . . shit for supper. Give me a packet of Salve, or I'll have you by the throat before you can even blink. I've got a good grip. Things would be over real quick. Ah, you dumb fool, I've told you a pack of lies. And look at you, snivelling like a pup.'

I gave him a packet of Salve.

'Well, that's that!' he said, and got up and slowly walked away down the trench. 'But if you ever mention a word of this to the gang – now or in thirty years – I'll kill you dead. I bet you're writing a little poem in your head just now – "O love, what an enchanting dream!"'

I watched him go, confused by this sudden outburst of anger.

Out of the early morning mist, a shell came screaming from the direction of Kiev. It seemed to be heading straight towards us, and I was not mistaken. The shell hit the parapet and exploded. It sounded as though the air around us had popped like a large iron balloon. Shrapnel whistled through the air like a flight of swifts. The orderly turned with a look of surprise, fell face first into the trench wall, spat one final curse together with a mouthful of blood, and then slumped down into a puddle of muddy snow. A crimson stain slowly spread over the snow.

A second shell exploded near the foxhole. Pan Sotnik jumped out of the bunker. Then the parapet was hit by another shell.

‘Our own guns!’ Pan Sotnik cried in a quivering voice, shaking his fist at Kiev. ‘Shot at by our own troops! Idiots! Scoundrels! You’re shooting your own men!’

He turned to us. ‘Pull back to Priorka. On the double! No panicking! To hell with your damned Hetman.’

We took off running. With the sound of each new shell, we hit the ground. Eventually, we made our way back down to Priorka. The first ones there were, of course, the motor boys. It turned out that the Hetman’s artillery had somehow decided that Petlyura’s men had overrun our trenches and so opened fire on them. As we were retreating, Pan Sotnik stepped over the orderly and without turning round said to me: ‘Take his documents just in case. Maybe we can find his relatives. We can’t really just leave him like a dog.’

The orderly was lying face down. I rolled him over on his back. He was still warm, and even though he was thin, he still seemed very heavy. He had been hit by shrapnel in the neck. The blue mouth tattooed on his hand was smeared with blood. I undid the buttons of the light blue Austrian greatcoat he was wearing and took out of the pocket of his tunic a crumpled and obviously forged identity card as well as an envelope addressed to a ‘Yelizaveta Tenisheva, 13 Sadovaya Street, Simbirsk’.

The bedraggled, dwindling troops of the Hetman’s army had begun assembling on the hay-strewn square in the centre of Priorka. The local inhabitants were coming back out onto the streets, discussing the departure of the Cossacks and rejoicing at their plight with unconcealed relish. But in spite of everything, detachments of German cavalry on their well-fed bays went on calmly patrolling the streets. Hetman or Petlyura – it was all the same to the Germans; the main thing was to maintain order. Upon Pan Sotnik’s command, we dumped all our rifles and ammunition in a pile on the square. The Germans immediately rode up and stood guard over it. They didn’t even bother to look our way.

‘And now, everybody go home!’ said Pan Sotnik, removing his yellow and blue epaulettes and then tossing them on the ground. ‘As best you can. It’s every man for himself. The city’s a mess. Petlyura’s men running up one street, the Hetman’s fleeing down another. So, make sure you look both ways – left and right – before crossing the street. I wish you good luck.’

He smiled awkwardly at his own lame joke, gave us a friendly wave and then hurried away. Some of the Cossacks removed their greatcoats and either sold them then and there to some of the locals for a few kopecks or just gave them away for free and walked away in nothing but tunics stripped of their badges. I was cold and so I kept my greatcoat on, although I did tear off the epaulettes. Wadding stuck out of the holes on my shoulders, and so anyone could immediately guess what I was.

I walked to St Cyril’s Church, where I had been long ago with my father and Vrubel. At that time, this whole neighbourhood, with its knotty elm trees and its deep ravines overgrown with hawthorn bushes, had seemed so mysterious and threatening to me. Now I was slowly trudging up the steep, dirty road to Lukyanovka, and I had no sense of the strangeness of the place, or even of the times. No doubt I was simply too exhausted to notice anything. I was aware, of course, that we were living in an epochal, practically fantastical period in history, but at times it felt like a nightmare or a grotesque distortion of reality. At that particular moment, all I could see was the same dreary sky that had been hanging over these tumbledown suburban streets and hovels thirty years ago. Vague ideas drifted through my mind, and I wondered, how much longer could this ridiculous third-rate show of Hetmans and Atamans and Petlyuras last? How much more of these noisy slogans, of these muddled and hateful notions, exaggerated beyond any sense of proportion, could we take? When would the curtain finally come down on this makeshift stage on which real blood, unfortunately, and not cranberry juice was being shed?

Back in the city I did not look left or right before crossing the street. I was sick to death of this cheap sideshow of war and politics, and anger robbed me of all sense of danger. I walked through a column of Petlyura’s men in my greatcoat with the torn epaulettes and was slammed in the back by rifle butts, although only twice. Groups of ‘true’ Ukrainians standing in sparse lines along the pavements cried ‘Hurrah!’ to the men and looked at me with rabid loathing.

Nonetheless, I managed to make it home, rang the bell, heard Amalia’s joyful voice call out, opened the door, and collapsed in a chair in the hall, light and happy thoughts whirling in my head, even though my greatcoat was pressing on my chest, harder with each minute as though it were some living creature trying to strangle me. Then I realised that it was not the coat, but the long, gnarled fingers of the orderly crushing my neck for a packet of Salve. I saw before my eyes the blue tattooed lips on his hand just before I groaned and passed out. I had had fainting spells like this as a boy. They were always a sign of exhaustion.

[1] Symon Petlyura (1878–1926), Ukrainian independence leader, supreme commander (ataman) of the

Ukrainian army, president of the Ukrainian People's Republic 1918–21.

[2] Reference to Pushkin's 1830 drama of the same name.

[3] Popular 1913 play by the Russian writer Mikhail Artsybashev (1878– 1927), best known for his scandalous novel *Sanin* (1907).

[4] Alexander Vertinsky (1889–1957), famous cabaret artist, actor, poet and composer.

[5] Common anti-Semitic slur of the time with reference to three Jews: Vulf Vysotsky (1824–1904), successful tea merchant; Israel Brodsky (1823–88), founder of one of Russia's largest sugar manufactories; and Bolshevik Leon Trotsky (1879–1940).

81

The Violet Ray

Next morning, I awoke in my room to the sound of cheering outside and assumed that Pan Petlyura, Ataman of the Ukrainian Army and the Haidamaka Battalion,[1] was making his triumphal entry into Kiev on a white steed. Notices from the city commandant had gone up around Kiev the day before stating with epic, humourless solemnity that Petlyura would be entering the city as the head of the government – the Directorate – on a white steed, a gift from the railway men of Zhmerinka. Why they had given Petlyura a horse rather than a railway coach or even a shunting engine, no one could say.

Petlyura did not disappoint the hopes of Kiev's housemaids, merchants, governesses and shopkeepers. He truly did ride into the vanquished city on a white though fairly placid steed. The horse had a pale blue saddlecloth with a yellow border. Petlyura was modestly attired in a wadded khaki coat. His only ornament was a curved Zaporozhian sword, apparently taken from some museum, which slapped against his thigh as he rode along. Loyal Ukrainians gazed reverently at the Cossack sword, the puffy pale face of Petlyura and his guard of Haidamaks prancing behind him on their scruffy horses. The Haidamaks, their heads shaven except for a long single forelock of blue-black hair hanging from under their sheepskin hats, reminded me of my childhood visits to the old Ukrainian theatre. There Haidamaks just like these, their eyes inked blue, had wildly danced the *gopak* – 'Hip, hop, shout! Now here, now there, turn about!'

Every nation has its own character, its own distinguishing traits. But the chauvinists who drool over them, who lose all sense of proportion in their fanatical worship, turn themselves, and these traits, into something pathetic and at times even disgusting. That is why jingoists are a nation's greatest enemies. It was this syrupy idea of Ukraine that Petlyura tried to recreate. Needless to say, he failed.

Riding behind Petlyura came the Directorate – the writer Vynnychenko,[2] a shambolic neurasthenic, and after him some ministers, all of them long-mothballed and utterly unknown personages. So began the brief and foolish reign of the Directorate. Prone to irony, the people of Kiev made the new 'independent' government the butt of a great many jokes. They were especially delighted by the sight in the first days of the Directorate of foppishly attired Haidamaks going up and down Kreshchatik with step-ladders and removing all the Russian signs. Petlyura had brought with him something called 'Galician', a rather clumsy dialect full of loan words borrowed from Ukraine's neighbours. Before this new intruder, the native language of Ukraine – sparkling, witty, sing-song and as shiny as the pearly teeth of the vibrant young village girls – retreated to the remote huts of Shevchenko and the quiet fields of the countryside where it hid throughout these troubled years, refusing to die and preserving all its poetry.

Everything under Petlyura had a contrived air – the Haidamaks, the language, the politics, the large number of grey-whiskered chauvinists who crawled out of the woodwork, the money – everything, all the way down to the Directorate's progress reports to the people. But more of this later.

Meeting a Haidamak in the street, people rubbed their eyes and asked themselves: 'Is that really a Haidamak or just some actor in costume?' Hearing the tortured sounds of the new language, one couldn't help wondering: is that Ukrainian or some recently invented version of it? And upon receiving change in a shop, you scratched your head with disbelief at the smudgy little scraps of paper faintly marked with yellow and blue ink: was this real or just some toy money from a children's game? There was so much counterfeit money being passed around that everyone decided to turn a blind eye and take whatever they were given. Whether fake or genuine, all banknotes were treated equally and exchanged at the same rate. You couldn't find a printing press in the entire city where typesetters and printers weren't laughing and happily turning out counterfeit Petlyura banknotes – *karbovantsy* and *shagi*. The *shag* was the smallest unit, worth about half a kopeck. Many enterprising people made their own counterfeit notes at home using Indian ink and cheap watercolours. They didn't even bother to hide what they were doing when strangers dropped in.

Few people were as busy making counterfeit money, as well as homemade hooch, as Pan Kturenda. Ever since that bombastic little man had pushed me into the Hetman's army, he had shown me an affection rather like a hangman's for his victim. He was amazingly attentive and always inviting me over. Interested in this last remnant of the nobility's lower rungs, somehow still afloat in what Pan Kturenda

himself called ‘our astonishing new era’, I did once go to visit him in his little room crowded with carboys of murky home-brew. It had the sour smell of paint and the particular medicine – the name escapes me – that was then used to treat gonorrhoea.

He was busy making hundred-rouble notes when I arrived. They were decorated with the image of two sturdy, bare-legged women with sultry eyes dressed in embroidered blouses. For some reason they were poised like graceful ballerinas on swirls of intricate festoons, which Kturenda was going over with a brush at that very moment. Pan Kturenda’s mother, a gaunt old woman with a twitching face, was sitting behind a screen and softly reading aloud from a Polish prayer-book.

‘The festoon is the alpha and omega of the Petlyura banknote,’ Pan Kturenda instructed me. ‘You could just as easily replace these two young Ukrainian ladies with any fat old women you like, it doesn’t matter at all. What does matter are these festoons – they must look official. If they do, you can easily change your hundred *karbovantsy* without anyone batting an eyelid at these deliciously piquant ladies.’

‘How many can you make?’

‘In a day, I can paint’, Pan Kturenda said importantly, pushing out his lips with the cropped little moustache, ‘as many as three notes. And sometimes as many as five. Depends on how inspired I am.’

‘Bassya!’ said the old woman from behind the screen. ‘Bassya, my son. I’m frightened.’

‘Oh, Mama, don’t you worry, nothing’s going to happen. No one would dare to lay a finger on Pan Kturenda.’

‘It’s not prison I’m frightened of,’ she said unexpectedly. ‘It’s you, Bassya.’

‘Water on the brain,’ said Pan Kturenda, gesturing towards the old lady. ‘Excuse me, Mama, but could you be quiet?’

‘No!’ she said. ‘No, I can’t. God will punish me if I don’t tell everyone that my son is a Judas.’ By now she was sobbing.

‘Shut up!’ Pan Kturenda shouted in a frenzied voice. He jumped up from his chair and shook the screen so violently that it danced about, creaked and released a cloud of yellow dust. ‘Shut up, you silly old fool, or I’ll gag you with an oil-rag.’

The old woman sobbed and blew her nose.

‘What does she mean?’ I asked him.

‘That’s my own personal business,’ he replied defiantly. His distorted face was covered with criss-crossing veins. It looked as though they might burst at any moment. ‘I advise you not to stick your nose into my affairs, unless you want to end up in some common grave with the Bolsheviks.’

‘Bastard,’ I said quietly. ‘You’re such a cheap little bastard you’re not even worth these measly hundred *karbovantsy*.’

‘Under the ice!’ Pan Kturenda yelled hysterically, stamping his feet. ‘That’s what Pan Petlyura does to people like you – tosses them into the Dnieper and under the ice!’

I told Amalia about the incident. She said she suspected Pan Kturenda had worked as an informer for all the successive governments that had ravaged Ukraine – the Central Rada, the Germans, the Hetman and now Petlyura. She was convinced he would try to get back at me. It was only a matter of time until he denounced me to the new authorities. And so, careful and practical as she was, Amalia set up her own watch on Pan Kturenda that very day. By evening, however, her precautions were no longer necessary, for he had died right before our eyes. His death proved as pointless as the whole of his mean, boorish life.

At dusk we heard pistol shots outside. Whenever this happened, I went out onto the balcony to see what was going on. This time I saw two civilians running towards our house across the empty square in front of St Vladimir’s Cathedral. They were being chased and shot at by a few Petlyura officers and soldiers. ‘Stop!’ they shouted, although it was clear from their efforts that their pursuit was only half-hearted.

Just then I noticed Pan Kturenda run from his room in the other wing of the house to the heavy front gate and remove a key big enough to be from some medieval city. Key in hand, he hid behind the gate. As the two men in civilian garb were running past, Pan Kturenda flung open the gate, pointed the key at them like a pistol (it actually did look like an antiquated firearm from a distance) and shouted: ‘Stop right there, you Bolshevik scum, or I’ll shoot!’ Pan Kturenda wanted to help Petlyura’s men by slowing the civilians down, if only for a moment, and this moment would, of course, have sealed their fate.

I had a clear view from the balcony of what happened next. The second of the two men raised a pistol and without bothering to look, much less aim, fired in the direction of Kturenda as he ran. Pan Kturenda, screaming and spitting blood, stumbled back into the yard, tripped on the cobblestones, fell, let out a desperate wheeze, and died. He was still clutching the key in his hand. Blood dripped onto his pink celluloid cuffs, and in his open eyes was a look of angry terror. More than an hour passed before a

rickety ‘First Aid’ cart arrived to take Pan Kturenda to the morgue.

His mother slept through her son’s death and learned of it only that night. A few days later the old woman was sent to the ancient Sulimovskaya Almshouse. I often came across its residents on my walks. They always went about in pairs, like schoolgirls, dressed in identical dresses of dark Toile du Nord fabric. Seeing them in the streets made me think of a solemn procession of ground-beetles.

I have described this insignificant incident with Pan Kturenda for the sole reason that it was so in keeping with the tenor of life under the Directorate. Everything was petty, mean and ridiculous, like a badly produced but at times tragic farce.

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One day, enormous posters went up all over Kiev informing the populace that the Directorate would be giving a report of its progress in the Ars Cinema. The whole city tried to squeeze into the cinema to hear the report. Everyone was expecting an unusual show, and they were not disappointed.

The long, narrow hall was wrapped in a mysterious gloom. None of the lights had been lit. The crowd made a cheerful hum in the darkness. All of a sudden, a gong boomed behind the stage curtain, coloured footlights came alive, and then there appeared, against a garish backdrop depicting ‘The Miraculous Dnieper in Still Weather’, an elderly but handsome man in black with a luxurious beard – Premier Vynnychenko. Unhappy and clearly uncomfortable, constantly fidgeting with his bright tie, he delivered a short, dry speech on the international affairs of Ukraine. The audience applauded. Next, an unbelievably skinny young woman with a heavily powdered face came out onto the stage. She was wearing a black dress and clutching her hands out in front of her in a gesture meant to convey utter despair. As the accompanist struck a variety of pensive chords, she recited in a frightened voice the verses of the poetess Galina: ‘They’re cutting down the young woods, the tender, green woods . . .’[3] They applauded her as well.

In between the ministers’ speeches there were short musical interludes, and little girls and boys danced the *gopak* after the minister of communications spoke. The audience was thoroughly enjoying itself, but a guarded silence settled over it when out onto the stage plodded the old ‘Minister of Sovereign Balances’, as the minister of finance was called. He had a dishevelled, truculent look. He was snorting with anger. His round, closely cropped head glistened with sweat. His silver Cossack moustache drooped over his chin. He wore baggy grey pinstriped trousers, an equally baggy silk coat with large pockets and an embroidered shirt tied at the neck with a cord dangling red pompoms at the ends.

He had no intention of delivering a report. He approached the footlights and stuck an ear out to listen to the faint murmur in the hall. For effect, he even cupped a hand over this furry ear. People laughed. The minister grinned with a satisfied air, nodded as though at some passing thoughts, and asked: ‘Muscovites?’

Sure enough, almost everyone in the audience was Russian. Yes, they answered unsuspectingly, most of us here are Muscovites.

‘I see-e-e-e,’ the minister said ominously and then blew his nose into a large checked handkerchief. ‘It’s all very understandable, although not at all pleasant.’

The murmuring in the hall ceased. The audience sensed trouble.

‘Just what the hell were you thinking?’ he suddenly thundered in Ukrainian. His face had turned as red as a beetroot. ‘What the hell were you thinking coming here from your rotten Moscow? Like flies to honey. May lightning strike you dead! Just think of what you’ve seen here! You’re here because you’ve so ruined Moscow that not only do you have nothing to eat, you don’t even have anything to eat it with!’

The audience erupted with anger. People were hooting and whistling. Someone jumped up on stage, carefully took the ‘Minister of Sovereign Balances’ by the arm and tried to lead him away, but the old man gave him a shove and nearly knocked him over. The minister had got into his stride. He wasn’t going to stop now.

‘Well, why don’t you say something?’ he asked. ‘Hmm? Playing the fool, are you now? All right then, I’ll say it for you. Here in Ukraine you can help yourselves to all the bread and sugar and lard and buckwheat and cakes you want. Back home in Moscow you’d be sucking lamp oil off your thumbs. And that’s the truth!’

By now two men had grabbed onto the tails of the minister’s silk coat and were trying to carefully pull him off the stage, but he was furiously fighting them off and shouting: ‘Beggars! Parasites! Back to Moscow with you! Go home and die under your Yid government! Back to Moscow, all of you!’

Vynnychenko appeared in the wings. He was waving his hand angrily, and finally the old minister, red from indignation, was dragged off the stage. To ease the unfortunate impression left by the minister, out onto the stage hopped a group of young men with sheepskin hats poised jauntily on their heads. Some

struck up their banduras, others threw themselves into the national dance, squatting and leaping as they sang:

> Oy, who's the corpse lying there at the funeral?
> Not the Prince, not the Pan, not the Colonel,
> It can only be the old crone's love eternal!

And with that, the Directorate's report to the people came to a close. Laughing and shouting 'Back to Moscow with you! Go home and die under your Yid government!' the audience poured out of the Ars Cinema and into the street.

Petlyura and the entire Ukrainian Directorate had a provincial air about them. Once glittering Kiev had been turned into a glorified Shpola or Mirgorod, with their stuffy, hide-bound officialdom, their interminable meetings, their Dovgochkhuns.[4] It looked as though the city had been made over as a stage-set for 'ye olde Ukraine', right down to the pastry shop's 'Taras Bulba of Poltava' sign. Bulba, with his long white moustache and his snow-white shirt emblazoned with scarlet embroidery, cut such an operatic, and intimidating, figure that many potential customers were too frightened to come in and ask for biscuits and honey. One couldn't be certain whether this was meant to be taken seriously or was just some sort of performance starring the lead characters of *Haidamaki*.[5]

It was impossible to make sense of what was happening. These were feverish, violent times when one coup quickly followed another. Within days of the appearance of a new government, clear signs of its imminent and ignominious collapse appeared. Each hurried to pronounce as many decrees and resolutions as possible in the hope that at least some of them would catch on and leave their mark on history. The governments of both Petlyura and the Hetman made an impression of utter confusion and a lack of confidence in the future.

To the north, Petlyura faced the unforgiving threat of the Soviet forces, and so he had placed all his hopes in the French, then occupying Odessa. His government began circulating rumours that the French were on their way to save Kiev. People were saying that they had already reached Vinnitsa and Fastov and that any day now the brave French Zouaves in their red trousers and handsome fezzes would reach Boyarka on the outskirts of the capital. Petlyura's bosom friend, the French consul Hénault, had given his word of honour on the matter. Bewildered by all the conflicting rumours, the newspapers decided to print every single bit of this nonsense even though it was obvious to nearly everyone that the French were sitting tight in Odessa and sticking to their zone of occupation, although the various 'zones of influence' (French, Greek, Ukrainian) were separated by nothing more than some rickety old bentwood chairs.

Rumours during the days of Petlyura became an elemental force, practically a cosmic phenomenon, an epidemic of the plague. It felt like a form of mass hypnosis. Rumours had lost their normal purpose – to spread made-up facts – and acquired a new essence. They had become a means of self-reassurance, an incredibly powerful narcotic medicine. Rumours were the only thing that gave people hope for tomorrow.

Even outwardly, the people of Kiev began to look like morphine addicts. With each new rumour, their dull eyes caught fire, their usual torpor disappeared and their mumbled speech became lively again, witty even. There were fleeting rumours and there were rumours that hung around long enough to keep people in a state of delusional agitation for two or three days. Even the most hardened sceptics eventually surrendered to the rumours, like the one about how Ukraine was going to be declared a department of France and President Poincaré himself was on his way to Kiev to be present at the glorious official announcement, or the one about how the film actress Vera Kholodnaya had recruited her own army and, like Joan of Arc on her white steed, entered the town of Priluki outside Kiev at the head of her victorious troops, and proclaimed herself empress of Ukraine.

At one point I began keeping a list of all these rumours but then gave up. It was enough to give you a terrible headache or even drive you quietly insane. I wanted to destroy every last one of them, beginning with Presidents Poincaré and Wilson and ending with Makhno and the notorious Ataman Zelëny, who had set himself up at Tripolie outside Kiev. I now wish I had saved that list. In fact, it was an outrageous Apocrypha of lies and the unbridled fantasies of helpless, bewildered souls. To keep my sanity, I reread some of my favourite books which I never grew tired of – Turgenev's *Torrents of Spring*, Boris Zaitsev's *The Blue Star*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Manon Lescaut*. In the murky darkness of those Kiev nights, these books truly did shine for me like inextinguishable stars.

I was living alone. Mama and Galya were still completely cut off from Kiev. I had no news of them. I had decided that come spring I would make my way to Kopan on foot, even though I had been warned that I would never make it past the 'Dymerskaya Republic', an utterly mysterious and lawless territory

that lay along my path. I was alone with my books. I tried to do some writing, but everything came out shapeless and read like the ravings of a madman. I had nothing to share my loneliness with except the nights when silence descended over our house and the neighbourhood and everyone slept except for the clouds, the stars and the occasional patrol. The sound of the patrolman's footsteps carried from afar. Every time I heard them, I put out the oil lamp to keep the patrols from stopping at our house. Once in a while I heard Amalia crying at night, and this reminded me that her loneliness was much worse than mine. For a few days after these tears she spoke to me in a haughty, almost hostile tone, but then she would suddenly make a shy, apologetic smile and return to her usual self, showing me the same great care that she had extended to all her lodgers.

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Revolution broke out in Germany. The German troops stationed in Kiev quietly and dutifully elected their Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies and prepared to return home. Petlyura decided to take advantage of their weakness and disarm them. The Germans discovered his plan.

I awoke on the morning of Petlyura's planned operation with the feeling that the walls of our house were gently shaking in rhythm. There was the loud banging of drums. I went out onto the balcony. Amalia was already there. German forces were goose-stepping in silence down Fundukleevskaya Street. The pounding of their hob-nailed boots made the windows shake. The drums thundered out a warning. After the infantry came the cavalry, the riders' faces equally grim, the horseshoes clicking together in time, and finally the artillery, jolting and rumbling down the paved road. Without saying a word, accompanied by nothing but the roll of the drums, the Germans marched once around the whole city and then returned to their barracks. Petlyura immediately rescinded his secret order.

Soon after the Germans' silent demonstration, distant artillery fire could be heard from the left bank of the Dnieper. The Germans were hurriedly clearing out of Kiev. The shelling grew ever louder, and everyone in the city realised that Soviet troops were quickly advancing from Nezhin. When the battle for Kiev began, in the outskirts near Brovary and Darnitsa, and we all understood that Petlyura was finished, his city commandant issued one last decree. It stated that the following night the High Command of Petlyura's army was going to unleash a terrifying secret weapon against the Bolsheviks – namely, a deadly Violet Ray which French military leaders had given to Petlyura thanks to the mediation of that famous 'Friend of Free Ukraine', Consul Hénault. To avoid unnecessary casualties from the Violet Ray, the entire populace of the city was ordered to take shelter in their cellars for the night and not to come out until daylight.

The people of Kiev were used to climbing down into their cellars, where they would wait out one coup after another. After the cellar, the next safest spot was the kitchen. It was a sort of citadel for interminable conversations and tea drinking. Kitchens were usually located at the back of the house, and so were relatively safe from bullets. There was something comforting about the smell of old food that clung to the kitchens. Sometimes water dripped from the tap, and if you left your cup in the sink, in an hour or so you could fill an entire kettle, put it on to boil and brew some strong tea out of dried cranberry leaves. Everyone who drank that tea during those nights would agree that it was our sole comfort, a sort of elixir of life, a panacea for all our troubles and misfortunes.

It seemed to me that the country was racing straight into a bank of impenetrable fog. As I lay there listening to the whistling of the wind through the bullet-riddled roofs, I found it impossible to believe that these impossibly dark nights, thick with soot and despair, would ever give way to a bleak dawn, if only to reveal once again the same deserted streets and the same blindly running men, armed with every possible make and calibre of rifle, their faces green from ice and hunger, their feet frozen, their fingers stiff from the cold of steel triggers. Every last bit of human warmth had been blown out of these men through their threadbare greatcoats and their coarse calico shirts.

The city was deathly quiet on the night of the Violet Ray. Even the artillery fire had stopped, and all that could be heard was the sound of wheels rumbling in the distance. The more experienced of the residents recognised the sound – it was that of army convoys hurriedly withdrawing from the city. And that is just what happened. The next morning, not one of Petlyura's men was left in the city. The story of the Violet Ray had been concocted simply so they could leave Kiev that night without any trouble.

As had happened many times before, Kiev was left without a government. But neither the atamans nor the local gangs had time to take over. At noon – horses steaming, wheels clattering, crowds shouting and singing, accordions wheezing – the Bogunsky and Tarashchansky Red Army regiments crossed into the city over the Tsepnoy Bridge and once more life was shaken to its very foundations.

There was, to quote the theatrical expression, a complete change of scenery, although no one could guess what the future held in store for the famished citizens. Only time would tell.

[1] The Haidamaki (Haidamaks) were Ukrainian Cossack military groups that arose in the early eighteenth century.

[2] Volodymyr Vynnychenko (1880–1951), Communist revolutionary, writer, head of the Ukrainian government 1917–18, died in exile.

[3] Opening line of a poem by Glafira Mamoshina (1873–1942, pen-name Galina Galina) written in response to state suppression of a radical Kievan university movement.

[4] Ivan Nikiforovich Dovgochkhun, one of the petty noble landowners in Gogol's 'The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich' (1834).

[5] Shevchenko's epic historical poem from 1841 that tells the story of a bloody eighteenth-century Ukrainian rebellion known as the Koliivshchyna.

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The Bolshevik and the Haidamachka

Rain-soaked notices with menacing decrees from the newly established Military-Revolutionary Committee appeared on walls around the city. The decrees were short and momentous. Ruthlessly and without reservation, they divided the population of Kiev into worthwhile people and human rubbish. They began to clean out the rubbish, although it turned out there wasn't much of it left. It had taken to hiding in hard-to-find places, where it settled down to wait for better days. My experiences from Moscow started all over again. But there was a difference – here in Kiev I noticed an added air of licence and recklessness.

The Bogunsky Regiment was quartered in private homes throughout Kiev. Four soldiers were billeted in our flat. They brought a bomb used by aeroplanes, carefully laid it on the floor in the front hall under a bentwood hat-stand, and said to Amalia: 'Dearie, do be careful now and don't so much as lay a finger on this here, or there'll be such a big bang that your entire home and everything in it will be nothing more than a memory. Understood?'

'Understood,' she replied through pursed lips. She opened the door to the back stairs, and from then on no one used the front door again.

The soldiers of the Bogunsky Regiment carried so much weaponry with them it was hard to imagine how they ever got anywhere. They had everything: machine-guns, rifles, hand-grenades, Brownings, Mausers, sawn-off shotguns, hunting knives, daggers, swords. They also carried with them purple and red gramophone horns, sentimental reminders of peacetime.

As soon as the soldiers occupied a city, strains of long-forgotten, heart-rending romances wafted from every window. Once more, a morose baritone complained, his voice quivering, of nowhere to go and no one to love, while a lisping tenor lamented that never again would springtime come for him, no, not for him would the river Bug course mightily, nor would his heart ever again throb with joy. Once more, shouting 'Hai-da-Troika!', Vyaltseva galloped off, and a lovely seagull expired on some lake of flaming waters. Everything was all jumbled together – Varya Panina > [1] and hand-grenades, the smell of iodoform and the soft sing-song of Ukrainian speech, the red cockades on the Cossack hats and symphony concerts, soldiers' dreams of still ponds amid peaceful meadows and the hysterical cries of illegal traders being rounded up in the bazaars.

A kind, feeble old engineer by the name of Belelyubsky lived together with his wife in the flat below us. He had once been famous throughout the world as the constructor of the bridge over the Volga at Syzran. The Belelyubskys had a maid, a jolly, red-cheeked girl named Motrya. The regimental sergeant-major fell in love with her and proposed. Motrya hesitated. The officer insisted. Motrya still wasn't sure. She had some rather old-fashioned notions about marriage. She was afraid that he was trying to sweep her off her feet just so he could move in with her for a few days and then be gone for good.

One day Motrya came to me and with the direct honesty of a country girl said that she had nearly given in to the sergeant's advances but had run away in time and was now willing to have him but only if he agreed to marry her 'according to the Book' and promised to love her for life. She dictated to me a letter for him that comprised four short words: 'Yes, if for life.' I wrote it down in big block letters. About an hour later, having received the letter, the sergeant began charging up and down the halls, swearing to high heaven and barging in and out of the flats in search of the regimental seal. 'Which one of you bandits hid the damned seal?' he screamed at his men. He had a gun in his hand. 'I'll shoot every last one of you Yids if it's not returned to me this instant!'

The house shook from the tramping of boots. The sergeant began emptying out the men's knapsacks. Finally, the seal was found. 'I swear, for life' he wrote on the letter, and then affixed the regimental seal for good measure and sent it back to Motrya. And so, Motrya gave in.

A large, noisy wedding was celebrated two days later. A few gun-carriages drove up to the house. Coloured ribbons had been braided into the excited horses' manes. And even though it could not have been more than two hundred metres from our house to St Vladimir's Cathedral, where the ceremony was set to take place, the entire wedding party climbed onto the carriages and roared off. They drove round and round the cathedral several times, to the sound of clanging bells, hoots and whistles, and rollicking

song:

I sit on a barrel,
My head all a whirl,
I'm now a Bolshevik bride,
A Haidamachka with pride!
Ekh, lil' darling, for whom are you yearning?
If Bogun should get you, you won't be returning!
Bogun's our commander,
You know what he's after,
Tho' covered with holes and scars,
He still makes the girls see stars!

At the words 'Ekh, lil' darling' the drivers pulled up on the reins and the horses stopped, pranced and shook the bells in time to the tune. It was a brilliant performance, and a large crowd had formed before the cathedral to watch and cheer.

On the third day (when for some reason trouble always seems to happen) the regiment was roused in the middle of the night. They gathered themselves reluctantly, in silence, saying only when questioned: 'They're sending us to Zhitomir. To restore order. The priests there are rebelling.'

Motrya was sobbing. Her worst fears had come to pass – the sergeant was leaving and never coming back. At this the sergeant flew into a rage. 'Herd all the lodgers out into the yard!' he yelled at his men, punctuating his words upon reaching the bottom of the stairs by firing his pistol into the ceiling. 'Everybody into the courtyard! This instant, you bloody parasites!'

The men forced the frightened lodgers out of their rooms and into the yard. It was late on a winter night. Ice crystals hung in the still, cold air. Women cried and clutched their sleepy, quivering children to their breasts.

'Stop your carrying on,' the soldiers said. 'Nothing's going to happen to you. It's just our sergeant, that devilish Motrya drives him mad.'

The sergeant lined up his men to face the frightened group of lodgers and then stepped forward. He was holding a wailing Motrya by the hand. They came to a stop in the middle of the icy yard. He drew his sword, scratched a large cross in the ice, and shouted: 'Warriors and citizens of a free Russia! You are my witnesses that by this cross and by my native land, I swear never to desert my queen and to return to her. And I swear that we shall make a home together in the village of Moshny near the celebrated town of Kanev, and to this I sign my name and pledge my troth.'

He hugged Motrya, who was still crying, and then gently pushed her away and barked at his men: 'Mount the carriages! March!'

The men flung themselves up onto the carriages and hurtled out of the yard whistling and singing. We could hear the metal wheels thunder off down Bibikovsky Boulevard in the direction of the Zhitomirsky Highway. It was all over. Motrya dried her tears. 'To hell with him, the damned heathen!' she said before turning and going back inside to the Belelyubskys' flat. Life resumed its normal course. Yet it seemed to have lost some of its lustre, and soon the people of Kiev began to speak about the Bogunsky Regiment with unmistakable nostalgia. The soldiers had been cheerful, big-hearted and incredibly brave young men. They had brought with them the smell of battle, bullet-ridden red banners, dashing songs and a selfless devotion to the revolution. They had come and gone, but for a long time afterwards a current of revolutionary romanticism pulsed through Kiev, bringing a smile to the faces of its citizens who had been through so much.

The man in charge of the Bogunsky Regiment at the time was named Shchors. He soon became a legend. I first heard of him from his men, who told me ecstatic stories of their commander's uncompromising bravery and talent. What amazed me the most was the men's devoted, almost childlike, love for Shchors. For them, he embodied the best possible qualities of military leadership – steadfastness, resourcefulness, fairness, admiration for the common man and inexhaustible and, if one can put it so, sober romanticism. The men of the Bogunsky Regiment were young, and so was Shchors. Their youth combined with their faith in the victory of the revolution had transformed this military unit into a sort of brotherhood, strengthened by a shared enthusiasm and by the blood they had spilled together.

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No external events could slow the sap rising in the trees. And so, at the appropriate moment, spring returned, the Dnieper overflowed its banks, the weeds in the fields grew taller than a man's head and the

battle-scarred chestnut trees put out their plump leaves and, for some reason, bloomed with unusual splendour. It seemed to me at times that these trees were the only thing left untouched in the world. Just as before, their leaves rustled over the pavements and cast deep shadows. Just as before, their shapely candles of pink and yellow-flecked flowers blossomed gently and discreetly on the branches. But no more dreamy-eyed schoolgirls strolled in these shadows, and among the dried blossoms that had fallen to the pavement lay shell casings that had turned green over the winter and stiff, grubby rolls of bandage.

Spring glistened over Kiev, steeping the city in vibrant blue. At long last, the lime trees blossomed in the parks, and their scent filtered into the houses sealed up tight over the winter and forced the city dwellers to throw open their windows and balcony doors. Soon after, summer stole into the rooms, bringing warmth and light breezes, and all our fears and troubles dissolved in its drowsy peace. It's true, however, that we had no bread, and survived on nothing more than last year's frozen potatoes.

I got a job at a strange organisation. It was almost impossible to pronounce the abbreviation for its name. I only recall the beginning: 'Obgubsnabchuprod . . .' The rest was so complicated that even the organisation's director, a fat Armenian with a black imperial and a Mauser slung around his neck (just as one would carry a camera), snorted and frowned every time he signed a piece of letterhead. It's hard to say what the organisation dealt in exactly. It was mostly calico. The corridors and rooms were all piled high with bales of calico. They were never sold or given to anyone under any circumstances. Rather, the bales were being constantly delivered, then taken away to the warehouse, then dragged back and stacked up again in the corridors. This perpetual back and forth and back and forth drove the employees out of their minds.

I had a good deal of free time. I tried to track down my old school-mates, but no one was left in Kiev other than Emma Shmukler. I rarely saw him. He had become quiet and sad, perhaps because his family had forced him to give up his dream of becoming a painter. Emma's father had become ill, and so all the responsibilities fell on Emma. He alone had to protect his relations against famine, requisitioning, eviction, Petlyura's pogroms and raids, and what was called at the time *uplotnenie*, 'consolidation', when whole families moved into a single room and the rest of their flat was handed over to strangers.

Once again, as in my schooldays, I went to evening concerts in the garden of the former Merchants' Club. The roses and canna lilies were all gone, replaced by mint and wormwood. Quite often extraneous sounds found their way into the music – distant explosions, the crackle of gunfire – but no one took the slightest notice.

During those days in Kiev I became consumed by the works of that great French writer and literary mystifier, Stendhal. I never gave much thought to the nature of his mystifications, for I considered them perfectly legitimate, as I still do, since they testified to an inexhaustible store of ideas and images so varied that it was unthinkable to combine them under one name. No one would ever believe that one person was capable of penetrating so deeply into so many and such different areas of life – painting, the steel trade, daily life in the French provinces, the fog of war at Waterloo, the art of seduction, the rejection of the bourgeois age, the work of the quartermaster, the music of Cimarosa and Haydn.

When I learned that his extensive diaries, so full of exciting events and rich with ideas, were largely fictitious, but so convincingly written that even the most knowledgeable experts of the era were fooled by them, I could only bow before the genius and literary courage of this mysterious and solitary figure. Ever since he has been my secret friend. It is difficult to say how many times I have strolled through Rome and the Vatican, how many trips I have taken to the provincial towns of France, how many operas I have seen at La Scala, and how many brilliant conversations among the great minds of the nineteenth century I have overheard in the company of this clumsy, puzzling man.

Soon my luck changed. The writers Mikhail Koltsov and Yefim Zozulya[2] arrived in Kiev from Moscow. They began to publish an art magazine, and I was taken on as its literary editor. The work was light. The magazine was quite meagre, something along the lines of a school exercise book with half the pages torn out. Self-confident, ironical and witty, Koltsov rarely came by the office. I spent my days in the single room with Zozulya, who was so short-sighted, kind and accommodating that he could never be mistaken for the popular 'man of steel' from Moscow.

I showed Zozulya the beginning of my first and still unfinished novel, *The Romantics*. He genuinely liked it but did say that I had overdone the self-analysis bits and that, besides, it was too wordy. Zozulya was then writing a series of stories no longer than half a dozen lines each. He liked to say that every story was 'shorter than a sparrow's beak'. They resembled fables and had a clear moral. He considered literature to be a form of teaching, a sermon. For me, literature possessed something much greater than this narrow utilitarian function, and so we quarrelled constantly.

By then I was already convinced that genuine literature was the purest form of expression for a free spirit's heart and mind, that only in literature could an artist reveal all the complex richness and power

of the human soul, and in that way redeem us, in a sense, of the many sins of our commonplace lives. I thought of literature as a gift, given to us by a distant and precious future, that reflected humanity's dream over the centuries for perfect harmony and un-dying love on this earth, a dream that is born and dies every day but refuses to expire for good. As the quiet hum of a seashell awakens our desire to behold the still expanse of a misty sea, or the silver smoke of clouds flying across the sky, or the oceans of cleansing air rising from a damp forest, or a child's ringing voice, or the profound silence of the world, so literature draws us closer to the golden age of our thoughts, our feelings and our actions.

Meanwhile, as Zozulya and I sat arguing about literature, Atamans Zelëny and Struk were prowling around Kiev and making raids here and there on the outskirts. Once Struk managed to occupy the entire district of Podol, and it took a great deal of effort to dislodge him. Denikin's army was advancing from the south.[3] On the steppes beyond Kremenchug, Makhno and his men raped and pillaged. But few people in Kiev talked about such matters or bothered to take them seriously. There had been so many false rumours that no one even believed in real facts anymore.

[1] Varvara Panina (1872–1911), popular singer of Gypsy songs and early recording star.

[2] Mikhail Koltsov (1898–1940), Bolshevik, powerful Soviet journalist, arrested and executed as an enemy of the people; Yefim Zozulya (1891–1941), journalist and war correspondent killed covering World War II.

[3] Anton Denikin (1872–1947), former tsarist general, leader of the Volunteer Army against the Bolsheviks.

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Crimson Riding Breeches

My good-humoured arguments with Zozulya about art and literature came to an unexpected end with my call-up. So far, my short-sightedness had guaranteed me a so-called 'white ticket', meaning a deferral from military service. But now they were calling up everyone. Along with a few sickly youths, I was given a perfunctory medical examination and packed off to the 'Prisoners' Regiment'. As far as I can tell, this was the most bizarre regiment in all of history.

In one of the skirmishes with Makhno's forces, a top adjutant had been captured. His name was either Antoshchenko or Antonyuk, I don't recall. We'll call him Antoshchenko. Such were Antoshchenko's crimes that he was sentenced to death by firing squad. As he awaited execution in a cell of Kiev's Lukyanovskaya prison, his crazed mind sought a plan for salvation.

Antoshchenko sent for the prosecutor and dictated to him a letter for the local head of the Extraordinary Commission.[1] He wrote that the Soviet government didn't know what to do with the bandits it had captured. There were too many of them to shoot and what with the widespread shortage of food it made no sense to feed all these parasites. It was for these reasons that the bandits had simply been disarmed and released, and most of them immediately returned to their atamans and went straight back to looting, pillaging and murdering all over Ukraine. Antoshchenko offered a way out of this predicament: instead of shooting him, the Soviets should release him, and as an expression of his gratitude Antoshchenko promised to form an exemplary regiment out of the large number of imprisoned thugs and killers. He noted the great respect he commanded among these men and insisted that he alone had the authority to succeed with such a plan.

The government decided it was worth taking the risk and freed Antoshchenko. And he really did organise in quick fashion this Prisoners' Regiment, made up of separate companies of captured bandits based on their gang affiliations. There was the Makhno Company, the Struk Company, the Zelëny Company, and others for the Angel Hearts, the Red Coats and the Grigorievites. A final one was formed from members of smaller, less important gangs, referred to as 'the Forgotten Slaves Company'. It was to this Prisoners' Regiment that we 'white-ticket men' were assigned.

An escort picked us up at the recruiting station and took us to the regimental HQ in the Pechersk neighbourhood. Along the way he refused to acknowledge our questions but muttered from time to time in an ominous way: 'He's a viper, that one, you'll see soon enough' or 'So much as look cross-eyed at him and you're done for.' Apparently, he was referring to Commander Antoshchenko.

Upon arrival they lined us up with other conscripts opposite a small old house. The tops of the lilacs in the garden extended beyond the roofline. There were no obvious signs of danger, although the tense, pale faces of the escorts did not bode well. A short man with bushy black side-whiskers and crooked crab legs waddled out of the house. He wore a red wool tunic, crimson riding breeches with silver piping, enormous, clanking spurs and boots made of red leather. To this he had added red leather gloves on his pudgy hands and a scarlet-tipped Cossack hat pulled low over his forehead. It was the exact caricature of a 'Red Commander' as envisioned by Makhno's men.

None of us conscripts dared to so much as smile. Just the opposite – we shuddered upon catching sight of the man's eyes, bright and almost white with malice. We guessed this had to be Antoshchenko. On one side of the belt around his waist hung a Mauser with a large wooden butt and on the other a curved sabre in a sheath decorated with silver. He pulled a snow-white handkerchief from the pocket of his riding breeches, delicately shook it out and wiped his lips before asking in a hoarse voice: 'Who'd you bring me this time, slaves? More scum of the earth?'

The escorts were silent. Antoshchenko slowly walked up and down the ranks, inspecting each one of us from head to toe. Two lanky officers walked behind him. We assumed they must have been battalion commanders. All of a sudden, Antoshchenko unsheathed his sabre and cried in a high, plaintive voice: 'I'm going to teach you to serve the revolution, and when I'm done, I'm going to have my way with your mothers! Understand, you bastards? Do you know who I am? I carved up General Kaledin with this very sword, so just imagine what I can do to the likes of you with it. I spit up a dozen mugs of blood a day, I've taken more bullets for the Fatherland than any man alive, and that's why Moscow sends me thirty

thousand gold roubles a month, just for pocket money. Did you know that, eh? Well, if not, maybe you do know that I don't waste my time on human scum like you. Some hot lead in the back of the head and into the ditch, that's how I handle things!'

He was shrieking by now. Spit bubbles popped in the corners of his mouth. Clearly the man was either insane or an epileptic. Stepping up close to a tall youth in spectacles, a student most likely, he prodded him on the chin with his sword hilt. 'And what's your problem?' he asked, staring drunkenly at the boy. 'What are the glasses for? With these very hands I killed my wife for sleeping with another man.' He had spread out his short fat fingers and was holding them up to us. The blood-red gloves were several sizes too big for him. 'Do you think because you're wearing glasses, I'll spare you? Why, I could just as easily skin you alive, and no one would lift a finger to stop me.'

We were speechless, bewildered and didn't understand what was happening or even where we were. The escorts stared at Antoshchenko with a look of tense anger. Only the two battalion commanders stood calmly by and looked at us with bored expressions. Apparently, they were used to such displays.

Antoshchenko hopped back a few steps and called out in an affectedly cheerful tone: 'Well now, who here can read and write? Do be so kind as to step forward three paces.'

He made an inviting gesture with his sabre, and I was about to step forward when the escort standing next to me said in a hushed whisper: 'Stop. Stay where you are.'

I stood still. All of us were literate, but many of the conscripts suspected something nefarious in Antoshchenko's voice, and so in the end only a dozen or so men came forward. Antoshchenko didn't seem the least bit surprised.

'And which of you are musicians?' he asked in the same phony tone. Again, the escort whispered: 'Don't move.' Next, Antoshchenko, joking and laughing, called out for cobblers, singers and tailors. The conscripts relaxed and a great many of them stepped out of rank. By now only a dozen of us useless ignoramuses were left – evidently, only those whom the escorts had managed to warn. Antoshchenko turned to one of the battalion officers and said in a tired voice: 'Commander, look at these shirkers – all wanting to be clerks at HQ or mend soldiers' trousers instead of dying a hero's death fighting for the oppressed peasants of the world. Do you see these bastard *intelligènty* trying to find some nice safe perch for themselves, even though they don't have any right to it?'

'I see them, Comrade Commander,' said the officer wearily.

'Send them all off today against Zelëny's men near Tripolie. And if a single one of them comes back alive, you'll pay for it with your head. Understand?'

'Yes, sir, Comrade Commander,' the officer said just as wearily.

Antoshchenko gave us illiterates a quick look, popped his sabre back into the sheath and said: 'I'd better not lay eyes on this rubbish again. Off to the kitchen patrol! For Christ's sake, forward march, now, all of you!'

We were separated from the other men and marched over to the regimental barracks in the Nikolsky Fortress. A large semicircle surrounded by slopes overgrown with elder, the fortress stood on a bluff overlooking the Dnieper not far from Mariinsky Park. As a boy, I had spent a good deal of time, especially in spring, in this shady and empty park. I had once seen a midshipman there and this encounter had awoken a passion in me for the sea. There, to the humming of the bees in the jasmine bushes, I exhausted myself in reading and rereading my favourite poets, reciting aloud those especially wonderful lines I couldn't get out of my head. This is why the grey-brick fortress, with its embrasures, its archways, its decrepit drawbridge hanging from rusty chains, its bronze lion heads on the cast-iron gates, had always seemed to me to be one of the most romantic places on earth.

The fort was deserted, neglected. Tall grass grew on the parade ground. Swallows nested under the eaves. The warm, drowsy smell of summer leaves drifted through the broken windows. The fort had never been besieged. It had stood for many years as little more than a peaceful architectural folly. This impression of the fort was so deeply ingrained in me that I was actually happy to be serving within its walls. But my naïve illusions were scattered like dust within minutes. Inside, the fortress was dirty and grim. The mildewed walls were covered with obscene graffiti and shook from the tramp of boots along with the noise of curses, blasphemies and songs. The barrack stench was so strong that it immediately settled into my clothes and never left.

They lined us up in a dusty corridor with a rough plank floor. The head of the kitchen patrol, a pale, effeminate-looking man, most likely a former officer, approached. He gave us a sympathetic look, tapped his boot with a riding crop and said: 'Well, men, so you've met the mad dog? Murder would be too good for a commander like that.'

We couldn't tell whether he was being sincere or trying to provoke us. To be safe, no one said a word.

'Ah, all right then, you scum,' he said. 'March! Down to the cellar – start peeling potatoes!'

We sat peeling rotten, wet potatoes in a cold underground vault until evening. Water dripped from the walls. Rats scurried in the dark corners. A narrow slit high up in the wall provided the only light. Our hands were numb from the cold, slippery potatoes. We talked among ourselves in hushed voices. I learned that the man next to me – a meek little man in spectacles with sad, red eyes – had been a worker in a razor factory in Lodz before the war. His name was Iosif Morgenstern.

We returned to the barracks that night. I lay down on my plank bed and fell straight to sleep. I was awakened in the night by the hollow beat of horses' hooves. I opened my eyes. A dim electric bulb burned at the end of a long flex hanging from the ceiling. All around me the other men lay snoring. The cheap clock on the wall showed three. In the muddy yellow light of the bulb, I saw Antoshchenko. He was riding a heavy bay down the vaulted corridor. The flagstones rang under the horse's shoes. The flex of a field telephone had been strung across the corridor and kept him from going any farther. He stopped his horse, drew his sword and slashed it in two. He rode on out of the corridor and into our barracks room. He pulled up and shouted: 'Fatigue squad, fall in!'

Startled, sleepy men jumped from their beds and hastily lined up. Nearly all barefoot, they stood there on the stone floor, groggy and shivering. Antoshchenko began in a calm voice: 'At this very moment I'm having a machine-gunner brought over and am going to order him to shoot every last one of you, like so many quail. Do you think I don't know that you've been planning to kill me, your commander, and that you dare to call me a mad dog?!' Notes of hysteria quivered in his voice. 'Fetch the machine-gunner!' he yelled, turning. Only then did we see his two orderlies standing in the doorway. 'Where the hell's he disappeared to, the bastard?'

'Comrade Commander,' one of the orderlies said nervously. 'We really should head back.'

'I'll kill you!' Antoshchenko screamed wildly. He was swaying back and forth in his saddle. 'I'll cut you into strips, you bespectacled little Jews! I'll slice you up with a saw like mutton!'

He started choking. Foam poured from his mouth, he pitched forward in his saddle and then he fell to the floor. We stood motionless. We later discovered that the same thought came to each of us at that instant – if Antoshchenko really did call for the gunner, then we'd rush to the corner where the rifles were kept, grab them and open fire.

The orderlies grabbed Antoshchenko and helped him up and into the corridor, and from there out into the yard and the fresh air. His horse, indifferent to what had just happened, followed a few paces behind. None of us, soldiers of the kitchen patrol, men who had ended up in this regiment by pure chance, could understand how it was possible that here in Kiev, a stone's throw from Kreshchatik, from the theatres and university, the libraries and symphony concerts, not to mention the good everyday citizens of the city, such a sinister den of bandits and its sick, half-mad commander could exist. This regiment's very existence seemed like a phantasmagorical nightmare. At any moment Antoshchenko could shoot any one of us. Our lives depended on whatever crazed idea he might think up next. We lived from day to day in fear of some new madness, and he never disappointed us.

We never left the Nikolsky Fortress. Not once were we permitted into the city. Even if we had been, there was no one we could talk to about what was happening with our regiment. And it would have been pointless anyway – no one would have believed us. We decided to write a letter about Antoshchenko to the government and Commissar of War Podvoisky, but events overtook us.

Several days passed in relative calm. Part of the regiment had been sent to Tripolie against Zelëny's forces, and the remaining companies were placed on guard duty in Kiev, protecting warehouses and the goods station, taking part in raids against speculators at the Bessarabsky Market and near the famous Café Semadeni on Kreshchatik. And then, late one night, we were roused by an alarm signal and lined up in a large square on the parade ground in front of the fortress. No one knew what was happening. There was talk of some unknown gang approaching from Svyatoshino and that we were going to be sent to hold them back from entering the city. The light air of excitement among the soldiers somehow found its way to us in the fatigue squad, even though we had not been issued with a single bullet for our Japanese rifles.

We stood and waited on the parade ground. A rainy dawn was breaking through the clouds beyond the Dnieper. The chestnut trees had released their broad green leaves, which hung down like fingers. There was the smell of dusty grass, and the bells of the Pechersk Monastery struck the useless hour of four o'clock.

'Company, attention!' the officers shouted. The men drew themselves up and froze. A gleaming black landau drove swiftly into the centre of the square. Two Orlov trotters, dappled greys, stopped and began to paw the ground. Antoshchenko was standing in the landau together with three young women in large hats. They were playfully elbowing each other, giggling and squealing with joy.

'Regiment, listen!' a drunken Antoshchenko shouted, raising his sabre over his head. 'Gather round the

carriage . . . by platoons . . . singing my favourite song . . . in a slow, ceremonial march . . . Let's go . . . March!'

He dropped his sabre. The regiment remained in place. Only the First Company, made up of Makhno's men, took a few tentative steps forward towards the landau. The song leaders launched into 'Don't you cry, Marusya, you'll be mine,' but quickly stopped, and the company, now completely confused, came to a disorganised halt.

'March!' Antoshchenko screamed wildly. The regiment remained motionless. No one said a word. The women stopped giggling. It was so quiet we could hear Antoshchenko's angry, uneven breathing.

'Ah, so that's how it is, you sons of bitches,' Antoshchenko wheezed and pulled his Mauser from the holster. That very instant came a cry from the back row: 'Trying to impress his silly bimbos, the dog! At him, boys! Kill him!'

A shot rang out. Antoshchenko's coachman pulled the horses round so sharply they reared, and then bolted out of the parade ground and down the street along the slope of Mariinsky Park. They were chased by several rifle shots. Then the regiment broke rank. The men began cursing and yelling wildly. Makhno's First Company was driven up against a wall. The men fought back with their rifle butts. Amid all this noise, piercing two-fingered bandit whistles rang out and seemed to hover in the air over everything – the parade ground, the fortress and even Kiev itself.

'Back to the barracks! Quiet!' shouted the commanders, although by now no one paid them any attention. The regiment had mutinied.

Makhno's men were being beaten because they were Antoshchenko's favourite company. They had retreated to the ground floor of the fortress and begun shooting from the windows. Cooks and orderlies were being beaten up left and right. It was hard to make out what was happening. The frenzied melee spread from the parade ground to the stairwells and the guardrooms. Fortunately, our fatigue guard had escaped notice, and so we quietly walked back to our barracks and barricaded ourselves inside.

The mutiny ended two hours later after the fortress was surrounded by the International Regiment, composed of Hungarian and Austrian prisoners of war stationed nearby. Amazingly, no one had been killed, although there were a good many wounded.

We were called back to the parade ground by the signal alarm the next morning at eleven o'clock. The men were angry, cursing and grumbling as they reluctantly fell in. Officers informed the regiment that members of the government were on their way to speak to the soldiers and get to the bottom of what had just happened. A collective sigh of relief swept through the ranks.

A wooden platform had been erected in the centre of the square. Before long, cars bearing members of the government, led by Rakovsky, drove up. The regiment presented arms. The band struck up 'The Internationale'. Looking at the columns of soldiers standing at attention, no one could have believed that only a few hours earlier the regiment had been in a state of rebellion. The only clue was the bandages covering up the wounds and bruises on some of the men's heads.

Antoshchenko had climbed unobtrusively onto the platform. He didn't acknowledge the regiment. Instead, he went over to the government delegates and tried to engage them in conversation but was studiously ignored. Rakovsky was the first to speak. He spoke softly, kindly, and tried to reassure the soldiers, telling them that a special government commission had been set up to investigate the complaints against the commander. A decision would be forthcoming in three days, and should the complaints be found justified, the most decisive of measures would be taken against the regimental commander.

Antoshchenko was standing behind Rakovsky. Blood filled his face. One of his cheeks, marked by a crimson scar, twitched. His hand repeatedly clenched, then unclenched on the hilt of his sword. At last, he could stand it no longer. Antoshchenko pushed Rakovsky out of the way and started shouting: 'Just what are you thinking, Comrade Rakovsky, talking to these bloodthirsty louts like a bunch of schoolboys? The government may lick your boots, comrade, but I don't intend to. I've had more than enough of this shit, and I'll talk to you all as I see fit. First of all, how dare you sons of bitches complain to our most beloved government about me, your commander, your father, in fact? Who put such an idea in your thick skulls? Complain? No, you ought to kiss my hands. Who was it who turned you cut-throats into men? I did, Antoshchenko! Who put shoes on your feet and clothes on your back? Again, I did, Antoshchenko! Who feeds you buttered porridge and makes sure you get your full tobacco ration? That very same commander, Comrade Antoshchenko. If it weren't for me, you'd all have been shot long ago, so many fish in a barrel, I swear to it on the life of my poor dead father, that fine cobbler from Khristinovka. And you dare to complain! And to mutiny! Scum! You there, with the red face – three steps forward, march! No, not you, the one over there, in the Austrian greatcoat. Just who issued that to you, huh? Answer!'

The soldier in the Austrian coat stepped forward three paces and stood at attention but didn't say a word.

'I gave you everything. *I* did . . . *I*, you snub-nosed fool! Just who was it who gave you puttees of blue wool, of the finest English fabric? Don't know, eh? Well, damn your eyes! *I* gave them to you, against all the regulations, *I*, Commander Antoshchenko, gave you puttees meant only for officers. I took pity on you vermin. What are you goggling for? Can't you speak? And another thing! You dare to complain about your commander, meanwhile you brave boys have been selling government bread on the sly to the monks at Pechersk. Did you really think I wouldn't find out? And who's been flogging soldiers' coats at the Zhitny Market? And who stripped those trollops over on Vladimirskaya Hill and sent them off to walk naked through the streets of Russia's mother city? I know everything. I've got you all right here,' at this point Antoshchenko began clenching and unclenching his red-leather fist. 'I could execute any one of you at any moment.'

His adjutant tried to stop him, but Antoshchenko paid him no attention. 'Brewing hooch all over the barracks, making coils out of gas-masks. Wasting bullets for the fun of it, for your ridiculous crimes, while there's a shortage of them at the front where soldiers are waging a war against the free Ukrainian atamans!

'All right then, you see what I mean. Enough's enough. Speaking here before representatives of the government, I forgive you. I don't give a fig for any of you, but I won't say that I harbour any hatred in my heart. What can I expect from a lot of oafs like you anyway? And so, men, listen!'

Antoshchenko pulled his bent sabre out of its sheath. The blade flashed like sparkling water in the raw morning air.

'All right now! Beginning with the companies to my right, on my count . . . forward march! Past the platform . . . all together now, sing!'

The band struck up a rollicking tune, and the regiment marched clumsily past the platform. The First Company broke into song:

> A puffed-up cock
> Went out for a walk,
> They caught him, they jailed him,
> Not even his passport could save him.

The government representatives, not waiting for the end of the song, quickly descended from the platform and drove off. The entire regiment wondered what would happen next. We were all certain that Antoshchenko would be relieved of command and cashiered. But the days passed and nothing happened. It became obvious that the government didn't have time to worry about Antoshchenko. Denikin had taken Odessa. The situation was grave.

Antoshchenko continued to strut about and bullied the regiment more than he had before the notorious mutiny. The difficult, turbulent existence of our regiment was brought to an end by a soldier in our company – that very same meek little Iosif Morgenstern I mentioned earlier. Although gentle and long-suffering, Morgenstern hated Antoshchenko with a wild, raging passion, especially after the commander vowed to 'carve up' all the Jews in the regiment and get rid of what he called its 'Jerusalem Gentry'. One night, against regulations, our company was ordered to guard a warehouse out beyond the Baikovoe Cemetery. Amazingly, each of us was issued with two cartridges for our rifles. It was warm. The air was filled with the smell of flowering stocks. A waning crescent moon rose over darkened Kiev and traversed the still Ukrainian sky. To keep from falling asleep, I sang bits of songs to myself –

> The sounds of the city have died completely,
> Beyond the Neva tower, there's silence in the gloom,
> And on the bayonet of the lone sentry,
> Bright flashes sparked by the midnight moon.[2]

As I was singing this old tune there came the sound of a horse's hooves. Someone had ridden up to the warehouse and hopped down from the saddle. I could hear him cursing. I recognised Antoshchenko's voice. Sometimes he rode out at night to inspect the guards. Antoshchenko walked over to the warehouse. Morgenstern stood watch at the doors. 'Who goes there?' he called out in his soft little voice.

'What the hell's wrong with you, damned fool!' yelled Antoshchenko. 'Can't you see who it is?'

Morgenstern now realised perfectly well who it was. Nevertheless, he followed regulations and shouted, 'Who goes there?' three times in quick succession. Without giving Antoshchenko a chance to answer, Morgenstern fired at him from point-blank range. Antoshchenko was killed instantly.

Morgenstern was arrested and then released the next day. Our regiment was immediately disbanded, and we were sent home.

It was late in the evening as I made my way along Institutskaya Street past the State Bank, built by an eccentric architect in the style of the Doge's Palace in Venice. It was humid, a storm was approaching, lightning reflected off the polished black pillars of the bank. A fresh breeze blew through the chestnut trees and then died. Through an open window in the dark I could hear someone playing the piano and a baritone voice singing: 'He's far away, he won't know, he'll never care about your grief.' The smell of grass came from the front gardens.

All of a sudden, I recalled that night of my graduation ball marking the end of my gymnasium years when I had accompanied Olga Bogushevich along this same street under these same chestnut trees. Her dress had seemed too formal even for that festive night, but still she was all beauty and joy. I recalled that night, her hands, cold with nervous excitement as we said goodbye outside her house, her eyes sparkling in the lamplight. All of it seemed to me now like an impossible dream from centuries ago. I couldn't believe that in the same world as this summer lightning and chestnut trees, in this simple, decent world of fresh grass and soft voices, of a young girl's tender trembling, of books, poetry and secret hopes, there could also exist a monster like Antoshchenko, this raving, bloodthirsty madman, this 'fiend from hell', as Morgenstern called him. I couldn't help thinking how thin was the veneer of civilisation that separated us from a bottomless sea of dark savagery. I wanted to believe that human reason would penetrate these waters, and I knew this was going to be the great challenge of our future and of our still unsettled lives.

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More than twenty years later, I was asked to give a talk at the main library in the city of Alma-Ata. The stiff, dry leaves of the poplars crackled in the late autumn wind. Irrigation canals carried icy water which smelled of the sea down from the mountains. A deep blue sky sparkled over the Alatau, beyond whose peaks one could imagine far-off India.

After my talk, a small, completely white-haired man with sad eyes approached me. 'You don't recognise me, do you?' he asked.

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'I'm Morgenstern. We served in the fatigue regiment together in Kiev.'

'What are you doing now?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter,' he said and smiled. 'But I'm happy for you. You've got to speak up for all of us in your writing, to give voice to everyone you've ever met. That includes me too, Morgenstern, your old comrade in arms.'

[1] The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (known by the abbreviation Cheka), the Soviet secret police, forerunner of the KGB.

[2] From 'A Prisoner's Song' (1826) by Fëdor Glinka, set to music by Nikolai Devitte (1811–44).

84

Puff Pastry

It was a gusty summer morning. The chestnut trees outside my windows thrashed about in a confused way, and cannons boomed off in the distance from the direction of Fastov. A battle was being fought there against Denikin's forces advancing from the south.

Amalia's dark flat smelled of fresh coffee. She was grinding the last of her precious beans. The coffee mill creaked unhappily, even screeching at times, as though it sensed its imminent doom. As always, the smell of coffee made the flat seem cosier, despite the 'Gift of the Sea' – a broken wall-mounted thermometer decorated with cockle shells that read three degrees below zero both winter and summer. Those everlasting minus three degrees sometimes made the flat feel colder than it was.

Someone knocked at the kitchen door. I heard Amalia go over to open it. There was a moment of silence, and then she cried out with excitement: 'Yes, he's here! He's here, of course!' Her voice broke. I dashed into the kitchen. Two beggar women covered in dust were standing there. Their heads were covered with kerchiefs that had been pulled down so low you could barely see their eyes.

'Kostik!' the shorter of the two cried. She sank onto a stool and her head dropped to the kitchen table. A homemade hazel staff fell from her hand and clattered to the floor. I recognised Mama's voice, knelt before her, and tried to look into her face. She avoided my eyes, but squeezed my cheeks with her cold, thin hands and began to sob, almost without tears. Only her convulsive breathing told me she was crying. Galya stood there, too afraid to move – it seemed that she had lost the last bit of her sight. I noticed that her legs were wrapped in strips torn from an old twilled cotton bedspread and tied on with twine. Even now I still remember those strips with their distinctive green pattern. Galya was not wearing spectacles. She was straining her neck forward, trying to make out the bent-wood coat rack in a dark corner of the kitchen, and kept asking Mama: 'Well, is he here? Is Kostik here? Why aren't you answering? Where is he?'

Mama and Galya had walked all the way from Kopan to Kiev. It had become impossible for them to stay there any longer. Small gangs raided the farm almost daily, although they had apparently not harmed either of the women since they were too poor to rob. Some had even taken pity on them and left Mama a handful of rusks or the crushed hulls of sunflower seeds. One bandit even gave Mama an exquisite though utterly moth-eaten Spanish shawl. He told her he had stolen it from a theatre in Zhitomir.

The last straw for Mama had been a bandit known as the 'Angel of Vengeance'. Having already seen dozens of atamans, Mama was staggered to find that this Angel of Vengeance was a converted Jew with a full beard and spectacles who had once run a chemist's shop in Radomyshl and regarded himself as a committed anarchist. He addressed her as 'madame' and proceeded to take every last thing she owned, right down to her sewing needles, although he was kind enough to leave her a detailed inventory of what he had stolen so that Mama could claim compensation, but only after 'anarchy had swept over the entire world'.

It had taken Mama and Galya over two weeks to walk all the way to Kiev. They had adopted the disguise of beggars, which they in fact were. Galya had walked behind Mama, holding onto her shoulder. She didn't wear her glasses, for that would have given them away: beggars were too poor for glasses. Moreover, in those violent, turbulent times, people in spectacles encountered widespread suspicion and even hatred. It was generally believed that anyone who wore glasses must be an enemy of the masses. Amazingly, some of this mistrust of men and women in glasses, which casts them as wily, devious and untrustworthy characters, remains today.

For several days Mama and Galya did nothing but rest and catch up on their sleep. A look of peace and happiness never left their faces. But then, as always, Mama decided it was time to act, and she began by helping Amalia with her sewing. They became fast friends, and now two sewing machines whirred away in the flat, while Galya busied herself making artificial flowers. She made them out of scraps of coloured material, working slowly and carefully. I was impressed by her array of steel tools and stamps. She used them to cut stiff calico into daisy chains, rose petals and leaves of various shapes. The buds and stamens were particularly difficult to make. Her flowers were pretty, but they smelled of paint and glue and very

quickly gathered dust. Deep down I was convinced that Galya's work was utterly pointless, especially during a time of revolution, famine and civil war. Who would want to buy these flowers when food was so scarce that people were risking their lives on long, dangerous trips to the countryside just for the sake of a pound of barley or a cup of sunflower oil? As it turned out, however, I was wrong.

Cloth flowers sold well in the little shops around the Baikovoe Cemetery, along with cheap wreaths, grave railings (chiefly made from old bed springs), sugary marble monuments and curly iron crosses. Once a week an old woman who supplied the shops came to buy Galya's flowers. She liked to encourage Galya not to waste too much time finishing them off because they would sell out no matter what for the simple reason she had no competitors. Her words made Galya indignant, and she carried on fussing over every last tea-rose for an entire day trying to make it perfect. She was conscientious to the point of self-torture.

The old woman, something of a born philosophiser, had a rather gloomy theory about trades and occupations, which she loved to expound in her monotonous voice: 'In times like these, you've got to earn a living from things that have always been, are, and will continue to be on this earth, regardless of all these wars and revolutions. Take hair, for example. As long as the earth keeps turning, hair will keep growing. And, mind you, just as the earth spins day and night, hair grows day and night too. Given that fact, I propose that the most profitable occupation has to be that of a hairdresser.

'After hair, there's death. We'll never stop dying. And no matter who's in power, dead folks have to be buried. A corpse can't dig its own grave, put a wreath on it, or write on its tombstone "Rest in Peace, My Beloved Husband Yasha" or "He Died a Hero's Death Fighting the Enemy". Death will always provide a way to make a few kopecks. That's just the way it is. One man's grief is another man's bread. One man's tears are another man's pitcher of milk.'

We were all terrified of this sinister graveyard crone. All of us, that is, except for Galya, who alone had the courage to engage her in pointless arguments.

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The rumble of the cannons to the south grew louder. Soviet units were by now fighting Denikin's forces at the approaches to the city. The calico outfit to which I had returned after the fatigue regiment had begun to evacuate. The bales of calico were being moved to the goods station and sent north.

One morning I arrived at work and found a notice pinned to the door. I knew the typewriter well – it was missing its R – and so the notice read: 'Oganisation Evacuated. Fo Futhe Infomation Dial . . .' I waited in the dark stairwell strewn with scraps of sacking in the hope one of my colleagues would turn up, but no one did. Puzzled, I went back outside and came upon about twenty wounded Red Army soldiers. Dirty and exhausted, they were tramping wearily along the pavement. Fresh bandages, as white as snow, covered the men's arms and faces. I followed them. It was obvious they had made their way into the city on foot straight from battle.

They walked along the noisy Vasilkovskaya Street, then the equally loud but smarter Kreshchatik, before descending to Podol towards the Dnieper. As they walked, the noise slowly died down, and they were left to their own silence. Passers-by stopped to stare. The sight of the wounded Red Army men making their way down Kreshchatik awoke panic that quickly spread to the side streets. I caught up with one of the soldiers and asked him where they had been fighting.

'Near the Red Tavern,' he said without bothering to look at me. 'It's pretty hot over there now, comrade.'

Denikin's forces had attacked from the south-east, from the direction of Darnitsa, yet the Red Tavern was over to the south-west of Kiev.

'Have Denikin's men really encircled the city? Are there that many of them?' people asked from the crowd.

'What are you talkin' about, Denikin's men!' the soldier said angrily. 'They're nowhere near there.'

'Then who were you fighting?'

'Well, the enemy, of course,' he said, grinning, and then walked off to catch up with the others.

None of this made sense. And when, an hour later, shells began flying overhead with the now familiar screech and exploding in the Podol neighbourhood and on the wharfs, complete panic gripped the inhabitants of Kiev. Once more, everyone took shelter in their cellars. Once more, night patrols were organised in the courtyards, oil lamps went out with each explosion, water was hurriedly stored in every possible container, rumours spread, people lay awake at night unable to sleep.

Night watch was perhaps the calmest of occupations during this violent time. I actually loved my shift on duty in our nice little courtyard beside the solid wicket set into the equally solid iron gate. For some reason the closeness of the yard at night and its lone chestnut tree made me feel as safe as in an

impregnable fortress. There was no thought of carrying a weapon – you could be shot on the spot just for holding a child's popgun. The only thing we watchmen were expected to do was to raise the alarm at the first sign of danger so the house residents wouldn't be caught unawares. For this, we were given a large copper bowl and a hammer.

I am sure the reason I loved night duty was the strange and completely illusory feeling of safety it gave me, a feeling that owed much to the danger all around. Danger was lying in wait right there, just on the other side of that iron wicket no more than two millimetres thick. Just open the wicket and cross the threshold, and you were face to face with the terrifying unknown that stalked the dark, dead streets of the city at night. Cross the threshold and you could hear someone sneaking through the garden and sense with every single nerve in your body the vibrating air as the lead bullet flew straight at your heart.

Inside the courtyard that fear disappeared. All you had to do not to give yourself away was to sit still and listen. Animal instinct told you that your only chance for survival was to remain invisible, cloaked by darkness and silence. I sometimes shared my watch with Avel Isidorovich Stakover, a former history teacher at the Levandovskaya Gymnasium for Girls. Despite the fact that Stakover had taught at a girls' school, he was a terrible misogynist. A small man with a scraggy beard and bloodshot eyes, slovenly and always enraged, he never grew tired of calling down curses, like some Prophet Jeremiah, on the head of every last woman without exception.

There was only one subject he could discuss in a calm, relaxed manner – the Middle Ages. He insisted that this was the loveliest age in the history of humanity. Stakover had his reasons for this, accepting, of course, one excluded the era's embrace of chivalry, courtly love and the whole cult of the Virgin Mary. Everything else, however, suited him just fine. He liked to tick off the merits of the Middle Ages on his fingers. First, the earth wasn't so crowded. Second, dense forests, brooks, streams and rivers came right up to your doorstep. You lived on the life-giving air of the woods and the pure fruits of the earth, not on paraffin and tins. Third, great poetry had already flourished, and the life of the mind did not take a back seat to today. And fourth, people were simpler, less homogenised, and so more attractive than at the height of civilisation.

Stakover did not miss an opportunity to try to convince me of the beauty of the Middle Ages. It was almost as though he thought he could easily transport me back to that distant time and that I had some sort of real choice about which epoch I might care to live in. He talked like a recruiting agent, like a zealous disciple, like an official representative of those Middle Ages from which he had just returned. Stakover even used the civil war in Ukraine and our shared night watch to sing the praises of the Middle Ages. On the night the Red Army units abandoned Kiev, shelled by an unknown enemy on the other side of the city as they went, he said to me: 'I don't know about you, my young friend, but I would like to live in a medieval castle. Only there did one enjoy blessed peace and safety in those dangerous times. Leaving the forest, where with every step one risked being snatched and hanged from the nearest oak, one entered the ancient shelter of the crenellated walls. Up went the drawbridge, the fortress gate was locked, and every man, woman and child felt not only the joy of escape but the full richness of life itself. It filled the air, it sparkled with the sunlit silence of the enormous flagstone courts, it rang in the music of the horn summoning them to the banqueting hall, and it was preserved in the heavy folios of the library, where the wind stirred the thick pages. And it is only in such a state, my young friend, that anything of immortal value can be created.'

In the daytime, Stakover showed me plans and drawings of old castles, with their massive towers, dungeons, embrasures, turrets, passageways, gloomy labyrinths, walls two metres thick, fireplaces, inner gardens and wells. All the castles stood on the tops of mountains or clung to impregnable rocky faces. The winds of Burgundy and the Île-de-France, of Lotharingia and Savoy, Bohemia and the Apennines buffeted them from all sides. The sun, like a burning crown, cast its rays over the towers, banners and moss-grown slates.

Mama especially loved to listen to Stakover. When I was on duty, she got up at night, threw on a heavy shawl and came into the yard. We would sit in a nook sheltered from the wind and talk in a whisper, often stopping to listen to some unfamiliar sound. Like all mothers, Mama still thought of Galya and me as little children and encouraged me in her good-natured way to see more of Stakover. 'He's a fount of knowledge,' Mama liked to say. 'A walking encyclopedia. It would be good for you to spend more time with him, Kostik. Don't look down on people like that.'

She was wrong. I never did look down on people like that. Just the opposite. I could listen to them for hours. I was impressed by their vast knowledge and grateful for their generosity in sharing it with me. What astonished me was that they, in their turn, were grateful to me for listening to them so attentively. They had evidently not been spoiled by too much attention, and I could explain this only by the fact that, as Pushkin said, we Russians 'are lazy and incurious'. Neither gymnasium nor university taught me so

much, or so thoroughly, as the books I've read and the people I've met. Being extremely shy, I have always envied people who feel comfortable in any surroundings and can easily strike up conversations with strangers. This is something that has always been difficult for me to do.

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Shells whistled over the city all night long. The explosions coming from Podol sounded as though someone were dropping large bundles of sheet metal. By dawn the Soviet forces had retreated to the north along the Dnieper, and everything was quiet again. Early that morning, Mama, who had been blessed with extraordinary inquisitiveness and a complete disregard for her safety, went out into the city, as she put it, 'to reconnoitre'. She came back soon to say that the city was deserted and even though there was still no sign of Denikin's troops, some of the city's more cautious residents had already hung out white, blue and red tsarist flags.

Drinking our carrot tea later in the kitchen, we heard the familiar cries of 'Glory!' coming from Fundukleevskaya Street. We went out to the balcony. The soldiers marching down the street holding blue and yellow banners were not Denikin's but Petlyura's. They marched slowly and confidently, full of pride in their Austrian uniforms. And the same old 'proper' Ukrainians we had grown so tired of seeing a short while ago were now back out in the streets in their embroidered shirts screaming 'Glory!' and tossing their moth-eaten lambskin hats in the air. The city was puzzled. Why Petlyura and not Denikin?

The soldiers marched to Kreshchatik, occupied it, spread their bivouac and hung their flag from the balcony of the City Duma. Hanging one's flag from that balcony was a declaration of sorts. Every new occupier did it as a way of saying they would not surrender without a fight. Rumours quickly began to spread that Denikin had ceded Kiev to Petlyura and redirected his White Army, which had been advancing on the city from the south, towards Orël. Driven nearly mad by the ceaseless coups and overthrows, the population hardly cared who controlled the city, as long as the new rulers stopped shooting, looting and throwing people out of their homes. For this reason, the arrival of Petlyura was met with complete indifference.

And then, at one o'clock, advance cavalry units of Denikin's army, followed by a regiment of Don Cossacks, entered the city from the direction of Pechersk, not far from the monastery. Denikin's forces advanced to Kreshchatik, only to find it already occupied by Petlyura's men, a state of affairs they found as shocking as had the residents a short while ago and that they tried to get to the bottom of. It turned out that one of Petlyura's divisions had been hiding in the villages to the west of Kiev and biding its time. No one had known anything about this. Taking advantage of the Soviet retreat, the division had decided to beat Denikin to the prize – the soldiers launched an attack on Kiev and after a two-day battle they occupied the city.

Quite naturally, Denikin's men were not pleased. Mysterious and complicated talks began between the two sides, after which a white, blue and red flag appeared on the Duma balcony alongside that of Petlyura's as a sign of dual sovereignty. The residents were now completely bewildered. It was impossible to know who exactly was in charge.

All doubts on the matter were settled that evening when reinforcements from Denikin's army moved in. Two more Cossack regiments suddenly poured like lava down the steep Pechersk hills onto Petlyura's unsuspecting troops. Galloping at full-tilt, lances levelled, swords flashing, the Cossacks roared forth, whooping and shooting their guns in the air. The steeliest of nerves could not have withstood this savage and sudden attack. Petlyura's men dropped their weapons, abandoned their cannons and fled without a shot. And the same old 'proper' Ukrainians who had been shouting 'Glory!' so movingly only that morning were now out on the streets and the balconies, shaking their fists and screaming '*Ganba!*' – 'Shame! Disgrace!' But the soldiers paid them no attention. They were running as fast as they could, looking back now and then in terror and hurriedly shoving things into their pockets. It wasn't until they reached Svyatoshino outside the city that they stopped to catch their breath. Their last remaining battery lobbed a dozen or so shells in the general direction of Kiev, but that was it. There were no casualties, unless you count a wrecked ice-cream stand on Vladimirskaya Hill and the loss of an ear from the plaster statue of one of those two great Enlighteners of Russia, either St Cyril or St Methodius, I can't recall which.

The following morning, an order signed by General Bredov had been posted around the city, announcing that from that day on, Kiev would forever remain a part of a united and indivisible Russia.

85

A Cry in the Night

It must have been at that late hour when everything succumbs to silence and the miry darkness. Even the water in the rusty pipes ran dry in the middle of the night and stopped its rhythmic drip from the tap in the kitchen. It was one of those torpid nights that breed troubled dreams and leave a vague sense of disquiet.

Someone had been trying to rouse me for a long time, but I could not wake up. In fact, I didn't want to wake up and kept trying to hold onto a vanishing glimmer of light in my befuddled mind. Then, in a sudden flash, the sound of crying broke through this tense struggle. I opened my eyes, quickly sat up and saw Mama. She was sitting at the foot of my bed. Grey, dishevelled hair fell over her face. Clutching the bed rail, she sobbed silently, her shoulders shaking.

'What is it?' I whispered. 'What's the matter?'

'Quiet,' Mama said, choking back her tears. 'You'll wake Galya.'

'What's happened? Tell me.'

'I don't know,' Mama said in a confused voice. Her head was trembling. I thought she might be losing her mind. 'I don't know what's happened, but clearly it's something terrible. Get up and listen. Go to the balcony.'

I got up and slowly groped my way across the room. The balcony door was wide open. I went out, listened, and froze. From far off, in the direction of Vasilkovskaya Street, tumbling violently through the darkened city towards us, came a collective scream of terror and mass death. No one individual voice could be discerned amid the confused, horrified wail.

'What is this?' I said, speaking to the darkness.

'It's a pogrom,' Amalia answered unexpectedly from behind me. Her teeth were chattering. I sensed she was at breaking point and on the verge of hysteria. I listened again. All I could hear were screams, nothing else. There was no shooting, no crashing of broken glass, no reddened sky from fires to suggest a pogrom. Things had been quiet for a time after the horrible Haidamak pogroms. And it had been quiet when Denikin's troops first arrived. The Jews had been left in peace. Only rarely, and then in the empty back streets away from crowded parts of the city, did gangs of Cadets with cocaine eyes ride by on prancing horses, singing their favourite song:

> Ride, Black Hussars!
> Save Russia, beat the Yids!
> Kill the Jew Commissars!

But after Soviet forces pushed Denikin's army back from Orël and began to drive it farther to the south, the Whites' mood changed. Pogroms erupted in towns and villages all over the countryside. The ring of pogroms closed around Kiev, until finally they reached Vasilkovskaya Street that night. The thugs had surrounded one of the large houses but failed to break in. Then, from the hidden darkness of the house, came a woman's scream, full of terror and despair, that tore through the sinister quiet of the night. It was the only weapon she had with which to defend her children – just this endless, unbroken wail of fear and helplessness. The whole house, from the cellar to the attic, responded to the lonely cry of this woman with a mighty roar of its own, which so overwhelmed the murderous thugs that they turned and ran. But there was nowhere for them to run to – they were now surrounded by people crying from all the houses along Vasilkovskaya and the surrounding streets.

This cry spread like the wind from district to district. What was so especially terrifying was that the cry came from dark and what looked like empty houses and utterly deserted streets, absent of any signs of life other than a few flickering gas lamps that seemed to light its way. I learned of all this later. At the time, unsure what was happening, I hurriedly got dressed and prepared to go and find that place where the heart-rending cry was coming from. Mama also got dressed. She had decided to come with me.

I didn't really know myself why I was going out. I couldn't stay at home. I realised that I wouldn't be able to calm down until I knew what was causing that cry. Not knowing was worse than the danger that

everyone faced who dared to walk Kiev's hellish streets at night. In the end, we didn't have to leave the building. As we were still dressing, the cry reached the neighbouring Fundukleevskaya Street and then the three-storey building next door. Not a window in it was lit. I went back out to the balcony and saw several men racing down Fundukleevskaya, trying to escape the shrieking houses. They must have been some of the marauders.

I was jittery from nerves. Sitting on the floor, rocking from side to side with her head in her hands, Amalia moaned softly. Mama got her up, brought her back to her room, and gave her essence of valerian. I listened. They were screaming in Podol, in Nova Zabudova, in Bessarabka – the whole city was screaming. The cry must have been heard well outside Kiev. This cry for mercy and charity rose up, beat against the low, black sky, and then echoed back to earth.

The pogrom failed. Denikin's commanders had never expected such a reaction. Surprised and embarrassed, they sent in armed detachments to restore order. All the street lamps were lit. Early in the morning, the military government posted a reassuring order around the city. That day, the *Kievan* published an article under the title 'Torture by Terror' by the famous conservative Vasily Shulgin[1] in which he uncharacteristically attacked Denikin's High Command for abetting pogroms.

I had heard people scream from horror before, crowds too, but never an entire city. It was unbearable, beyond terrifying, because it robbed one of the habitual, and clearly naïve, assumption of a common human bond shared by all of us. It was a cry directed at the last remnants of human conscience. It can't be denied that the path to justice, freedom and happiness has been truly terrifying at times. Nothing more than a profound faith in the victory of light and reason over barbarous stupidity has been able to save us from complete despair. Such is the power of the human conscience that it can never be written off for good.

Recently, a writer friend of mine told me something extraordinary. My friend grew up in Latvia and speaks the language fluently. Not long after the end of the war, he took a local commuter train from Riga to the coast. Opposite him sat a quiet, grim old Latvian man. They fell into conversation, and the man told my friend this story.

'Listen, I live in a suburb of Riga. Before the war, a man moved into the house next to mine. He was a bad, dishonest man. I would even say he was a thoroughly wicked man. He was a black marketeer. You know what they're like – no heart, no principles. Some people insist black marketeering is just another way to make money. But off what? I'd say less off human greed and more off human sorrow and children's tears. He worked together with his wife. So, anyway, when the Germans occupied Riga, they drove all the Jews into the ghetto. They killed half of them straight away, the other half they let slowly starve to death. The ghetto was completely cordoned off. Not even a cat could get out. If you came within fifty paces of the sentries, they'd shoot you on the spot. Hundreds of Jews were dying in the ghetto every day. Most of them were children. It was then my neighbour hit on his bright idea – load a cart with potatoes and drive it into the ghetto. He'd have to bribe his way in by giving a few to the German sentry, but he could exchange the rest for the Jews' gold and jewellery. Word was the Jews still had loads of valuables on them. And that's just what he did. I saw him before he set out on his first trip. You won't believe what he told me. "I'm only going to trade the potatoes with women who have children." I asked him why. "Because for the sake of feeding their starving children, they'll be willing to pay me double." I said nothing to this, but it still cost me. Just look.'

The old Latvian removed his pipe and opened his mouth. Several of his teeth were missing.

'I said nothing, but bit down so hard on my pipe I broke the stem and snapped two of my teeth in half. Talk about blood rushing to your head! Mine rushed this way and that – but mostly to my fists. They became so heavy all of a sudden that I thought they had turned to iron. And if he hadn't left just then, I could very well have killed him with one punch. I think he sensed it. He jumped back from me and snarled like a hyena. But that's beside the point. That night he loaded up his cart with bags of potatoes and drove off for the ghetto. The sentry stopped him, but as you can imagine, the two scoundrels understood each other right away. The sentry took his bribe and then said to the man: "You're a fool. Go on ahead, but the only things they've got left are empty bellies. You'll be driving back home with these same old rotten potatoes. Care to bet on it?"

'Well, he drove his cart into the courtyard of a large house. Women and children came out and stood around the cart. One woman was holding a dead boy in one arm and stretched out to him a broken gold watch in the other. "Are you crazy?" the man screamed at her. "Why do you need potatoes if he's already dead? Get out of the way!" He told me later himself he didn't know what came over him next. He clenched his teeth, and then with all his might began tearing open the sacks and letting the potatoes spill onto the ground. "Hurry!" he yelled at the women. "Give me your children. I'll sneak them out. Just tell them not to move a muscle and be as quiet as mice. Hurry now!" The mothers quickly hid their

frightened children in the sacks and the man tied them up tight. Imagine, it all happened so fast the mothers didn't even have time to kiss their children goodbye. And they knew they'd never see them again. The whole cart was loaded with children, except for a few sacks with potatoes that he had placed around the sides. The women kissed the cart's dirty wheels as he drove off, looking straight ahead. He yelled loudly at the horses the whole time, fearful one of the children might make a sound and give them all away, but no one did.

'The same sentry saw him coming and called to him: "Well? Didn't I say you were a fool? Now get the hell out of here with your stinkin' potatoes before the lieutenant shows up." So, he drove out of the ghetto past the sentry, cursing the beggar Jews and their damned children with all his breath. He didn't go home but headed off down some empty country lanes through the woods in the direction of Tukums. Our partisans had gathered there, and he gave the children to them to hide in a safe place. Back at home he told his wife that the Germans had taken all the potatoes and held him prisoner for two days. After the war, he divorced her and moved away from Riga.'

The old Latvian paused here. After a while, he smiled for the first time and said: 'Now I'm thinking it's a good thing I didn't lose my temper and kill him with that mighty punch of my iron fist.'

[1] Vasily Shulgin (1878–1976), prominent nationalist and conservative politician in the last years of tsarist Russia, publisher, ideologue of the White Movement.

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The Wedding Present

The train took eighteen days to get from Kiev to Odessa. I didn't bother to count the number of hours, but I remember well how each one of them on this exhausting trip seemed to us passengers like two. This clearly had something to do with the fact that every hour contained the danger of death. Three passengers were indeed killed and a few more wounded by stray bullets, a number that we all, especially the young priests from the Catholic seminary in Zhitomir, deemed nothing short of a miracle. It could have been much worse. The priests were trying to reach Poland by a crazily round-about route – first to Istanbul, then Thessaloniki, Belgrade and Budapest. Of course, none of us on the train believed a single one of them would make it to Poland alive.

One warm autumn dawn in Kiev, when the Whites still held the line between Orël and Kursk and we felt quite safe, we were suddenly awakened by the rattle of machine-gun fire. As always, it was impossible to know what was happening without a bit of 'reconnaissance'. Mama was always the one to reconnoitre. As we rushed to get dressed, still half asleep, she ran out into the street and soon returned, cheerful and excited. Mama's bravery always amazed me. It was largely due to the fact she was a convinced fatalist and believed that everyone's life was ruled by inexorable fate. There was no escaping fate. Everything had been set down at birth.

She returned with incredible news. Soviet forces had fought their way into Kiev from the west and advanced as far as the Galitsky Market. The distance between Kiev and the closest Soviet front was considerable. It was inconceivable that Soviet troops could have crossed this territory that was controlled by the Whites. Thus, their appearance in Kiev seemed a miracle, although an undeniably physical one, as the hail of bullets slamming into the brick of our much-abused house proved. It turned out that some Soviet units, which had retreated from the south at the beginning of Denikin's advance, had stopped in the vast and nearly impenetrable marshes around Irpen not far from Kiev. They hid there throughout the summer and autumn, and no one, neither Denikin's men nor anyone in Kiev, had any idea. The only people who did know were the peasants living in the villages surrounding the marshes, but they didn't tell a soul.

And now these units had suddenly burst into Kiev, occupied half the city, seized a good deal of food and ammunition, and then fought their way back out and taken off to the north to rejoin the rest of the Soviet army. The fighting had been fierce, erupting here and there in district after district and dying down only towards nightfall. The next day we learned that General Bredov, the commander of Denikin's forces, had decided to call up every male in the city under the age of forty. It was at that moment I decided to escape to Odessa. By then, Mama's nerves were better, and she had found herself a place to live. Galya was making good money from her artificial flowers, and the two of them had become friends of Amalia, who I knew would not desert them. I gave Mama nearly all the money I had, and we agreed that I would return to Kiev once things had quietened down. And so, I left for Odessa with an easy mind.

The first night passed safely, although the glow of burning villages flickered in the wind along the horizon. The train felt its way forward, its lights out. It stopped often and for long periods, as though listening to strange noises in the night, uncertain whether it was safe to go on. Sometimes it even reversed, backing up a bit into the shadows to hide from the light of an especially bright fire. And every time I thought I saw horsemen dressed in black crossing the rails far up ahead, unaware of our presence.

Riding together in our goods wagon were the five priests, an employee of the *Russian Word* named Nazarov, and a fidgety Odessan with the Ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole. His name was Viktor Khvat. He had served in the French army during the First World War and had even fought at the famous First Battle of the Marne. Khvat joked the whole way, mostly about his Jewish ancestry. He joked mainly to calm his fear. We all knew that if we encountered one of the many gangs of bandits then swarming across most of Ukraine Khvat would be the first one shot.

In those days many new expressions for being shot appeared – 'put up against the wall', 'change', 'liquidate', 'send to Dukhonin's HQ', 'settle expenses'. Practically every region of the country had its own colloquialisms. Khvat's wit was a precious commodity – a good joke could save a man from death back then. Nazarov had his own good qualities as well, which had got him out of trouble more than once. He

was by nature simple-hearted, a trait that had won him the sympathy of even the cruellest of bandits, and extremely short-sighted, a physical defect that others always took as a sign that Nazarov must be both defenceless and harmless.

The priests were pale, quiet and excessively polite young men. At the first whiff of danger, they surreptitiously crossed themselves and cast worried glances our way. By the third day, thick stubble had sprouted over their smooth faces, and they had lost their elegant appearance. Just like the rest of us, they had gone days without bathing. Their cassocks were torn from frequent forays for firewood. At every stop, they jumped from the train and with intense zeal tore apart wooden fences and crossing keepers' huts for fuel to feed the engine. Viktor Khvat acted as the foreman of their little brigade, which was considered one of the finest at its job.

In Fastov, a plump, cheery young woman with pert eyes climbed aboard. Her name was Lyusena. Before getting on, she flung a dusty bundle made from an old, torn Gypsy shawl through the open door of our wagon. At that moment, the priests were sitting quietly on their rough wooden bunks by the door and chewing on pieces of dry, rock-hard rye flatbread. Khvat liked to joke that horses had a particular taste for this bread, mostly because it was made from straw.

'Hey there, you oafs!' Lyusena shouted at the priests. 'Give a woman a hand. It's obvious I can't climb up by myself.'

The priests jumped up and bumped into each other in their rush to the door. Embarrassed by their poor manners, they joined together and with all their might lifted Lyusena into the wagon.

'Ugh . . .' she sighed, looking around the wagon. 'Not exactly luxurious, I see.'

The priests just stood there awkwardly and said nothing.

'All right, Your Graces, not to worry!' said Lyusena, having finished her inspection of the wagon. She reached down to hitch up a much-darned silk stocking. 'I'll take the bunk in the dark corner over there, just so's you don't think I've got designs on your virginity. Which is as much use to you as a poultice to a corpse, I might add.'

One of the priests giggled inappropriately, and Viktor Khvat said with a presumptuous grin: 'It's clear to me, my dear, that with you here we're all as good as sunk. Although it's certain to be fun and exciting.'

'Shut up, pipsqueak,' she said in a feigned bass voice. 'I'm from Odessa, got it? I've seen plenty of your types in my time. I don't actually dance the cancan, although I used to sing at the Tivoli Café in Kharkov. I could sing you songs that would make even your weak blood boil, my dear little boy. But enough joking around! Would it kill you to give a young lady a piece of that bread there? I haven't eaten a thing in two days.'

We treated her to some of the rye flatbread and from that moment life in our wagon became, as Khvat put it, 'new and bright'. With her lively spirit and indefatigable cheerfulness, Lyusena let nothing bother her. She joked about every last thing, even the constant danger of our rickety old goods train being shot up and captured by bandits, and teased the priests, who had no idea what to make of her. She traded witticisms with Khvat, sang music-hall songs and shocked the priests with her salacious stories. They moaned disapprovingly, yet their eyes glowed with admiration for the woman they called 'the great whore, Panna Lyusena'. It was obvious how much they liked her, and they kept trying to find justifications for Lyusena and her ways in Catholic dogma, the Old and New Testaments, and practically even in papal encyclicals.

In the end, they proclaimed her the Mary Magdalene of our times, a modern-day incarnation of the beautiful, red-headed prostitute who had sinned day and night and was later canonised for her pure love of Christ, she who had flung herself at the feet of the Crucified on Golgotha and by covering them with her hair had eased the pain in His tortured limbs. A great many women had travelled the same path from sin to sanctity, and as proof faint gold haloes had been lit over their heads in the paintings of the Great Masters of the Renaissance, and white lilies brushed their hems, spreading the scent of chastity.

The priests discussed this among themselves in low voices. I knew enough Polish to follow along and listening to them it struck me that Catholicism's cult of the Madonna is nothing more than another manifestation, albeit refined, of humanity's eternal and undeniable sensuality. I was to become even more convinced of this years later when I saw the fair Madonnas, beckoning me with their coquettish eyes and Gioconda smiles spread over their small, red, quivering lips, in the many-coloured half-light of the cathedrals in Naples and Rome.

Now, so many years later, none of this even seems possible: those conversations in that beaten-up goods wagon where the autumn wind whistled through the bullet holes and our motley company lived in such cheerful harmony – Lyusena, the impoverished singer and prostitute, the priests, the Knight of the Legion of Honour, the half-blind philosopher Nazarov, a volume of Heine always in his hand, and me, a

young man still with no clear profession and prone to flights of fancy.

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The train began stopping even more often, and the engine had begun to make imploring whistling noises. This meant that the fuel was running out, and if we, passengers, wanted to keep going and not sit there like dead ducks waiting for the closest gang to swoop down upon us, then we ought to hop from our wagons and get to chopping down the nearest fences or station toolsheds. Khvat would roll back the heavy door with a thud and shout: 'Your Eminences! Fetch your axes!'

We had a crowbar and two axes with us. The priests grabbed the axes and leapt from the wagon. Hitching up their skirts, they bared their heavy army boots and puttees. We jumped out after them and raced for the nearest fence. These raids were not always successful. Sometimes the owners of these fences opened fire on us with their shotguns. Then the engine driver started the train without bothering to give a warning whistle, Khvat yelled, 'Christian soldiers! To the horses!' and we ran back to the wagon and threw ourselves in.

After we had passed Belaya Tserkov, the train was shot at regularly. We never saw who it was since the gunfire came from forests and dense groves along the tracks. As soon as we heard shooting, we lay flat on our bunks. Khvat called this 'reducing the size of the target'. He insisted that a man lying down was sixteen times less likely to be hit than one standing up. We took little comfort in this, especially after a stray bullet pierced the wall of our wagon right above Lyusena's head, grazing her hair and shattering the Spanish comb she had inherited from her grandmother, a market woman who sold *bubliki* in the town of Rybnitsa on the Dniester. After hitting the comb, the bullet howled and for a moment appeared to float in the air as if looking for the exit before hitting the far wall and falling on the back of one of the priests. He picked it up, tucked it away in his purse and swore to hang it on a silver chain before the icon of the Black Madonna of Chenstokhov as an ex-voto for sparing his life.

Lyusena tidied her hair, sat up in her bunk and burst into a rollicking song with her shrill voice:

> Good day, my Lyubka, good day, my lovely,
> Good day, my lovely, and goodbye!
> You've gobbled up our last strawberry –
> Now you've nothing but olives so don't cry.

The priests took to the song and joined in. Lyusena stopped singing, thought for a moment, and then said: 'If I'm killed, bury me in my Gypsy shawl. I know the priests will send me off in proper style, of that I'm certain.'

Lying face down on their bunks (the shooting was not as frequent but had not stopped), the priests squirmed strangely. It looked as though they were doing everything possible not to laugh.

'I'll get to heaven,' Lyusena said confidently. 'No problem at all. I'll just sing St Peter a little *chanson* and he'll weep from laughing. I can just see him blowing his nose and saying: "Mademoiselle Lyusena, if only I'd met you down on that sinful earth instead of here in this boring heaven. Oh, what a time we'd have had! We'd have made people's heads spin. 'Aren't those two just something!' they'd have said."'

The most reserved of the priests said: 'That's blasphemy, Panna Lyusena! May Our Lady forgive you. As for us, we forgave you a long time ago.'

'And I thank you for it,' she replied, before adding softly: 'Boys, my dear friends! You have no idea how happy I am here with you. No one's made a pass at me or tried to put their greasy paws on me or even treat me like some kind of tart. And nobody knows I've been shot through the breast already. I shot myself in Lugansk. There's a damned town by that name. That's where my little boy died. My little boy . . .'

She lay face down on her bunk and slowly calmed down. No one said a word.

'And why the hell am I going to Odessa? What am I going to do there?' Lyusena said suddenly, not raising her head.

I got up and carefully opened the door. A small blue river was winding its way across the dry steppe. The white autumn sun shone brightly. Its soft, fading warmth touched my face. High up in the mists overhead, a flock of cranes was being drawn to the south and the sea, as were we in our grunting, shuddering train.

A freckled, red-haired woman got on the train in Korsun. She was on her way to her daughter's wedding in Znamenka and was carrying a heavy chest filled with her dowry. The woman was shrill and bad-tempered. A flounce of dirty yellow lace dangled from under her skirt and brushed against her greased hob-nailed boots. She ordered the hungry, pale-faced railway guards about as though she were

their ataman, shouting at them to load the chest onto the train. But no one would make room for her. The woman's chest, her sweaty, red face and her screeching voice had turned the whole train against her.

This must have been the first time I saw a classic example of a kulak woman – greedy, spiteful, petty, mean and intent on flaunting her wealth, which wasn't much except when viewed amid the general ruin and poverty. Ukraine was full of ruthless, arrogant kulaks in those days. Women ready to strangle their own fathers if there was a bit of profit to be had, while their 'darling sons' joined Makhno or Zelëny or some other ataman's bandit gang and, without batting an eyelid, buried people alive, smashed children's skulls with the butts of their rifles, and cut strips of skin from the backs of Jews and Red Army men to make trophies.

The woman was fussing around her chest, untying and retying the warm shawl around her shoulders, and yelling in a strained voice: 'You've filled the train with hungry tramps, and now there's no room left for us decent folk. Just look at them, holes in their trousers and not a kopeck to their names. And the women – tarts and worse! They ought to be squished like dirty bugs and not taken for a drive from Kiev to Odessa.'

A stoop-shouldered station official stood by her, not saying a word.

'Don't just stand there like an old goat! Why do you think I gave you that bread and lard? So every last beggar here could laugh at me? You promised to find me a seat – so do it! Or else I'll take that bread and lard back this instant.'

The official shrugged his shoulders and walked off down the platform. He stopped at every door and asked the passengers in a soft voice so the woman wouldn't hear: 'For pity's sake, make some room for her, the bitch. Her husband's the head of the village here, a real bandit. He'll have me beaten to death. There's not a crumb in the house, again, and she did give me a loaf.'

But the passengers refused. Eventually, the official got the engine driver to take her in return for the bread and lard. They decided to place the chest on the buffer plate between the headlights. The chest was hauled up with difficulty and then tied in place with a heavy rope to the engine. The woman climbed on top of the chest and sat down like a broody hen, her dirty skirt spread out over it, her warm shawl wrapped around her. The train set off.

So we puffed along, past whistling and jeering village boys, with the chest on the engine and the furious woman perched on top. At each stop she opened her basket and wolfed down great quantities of food. It's doubtful she was always hungry. She did it intentionally, out of spite, to have her revenge on the hungry passengers and gloat over them. She cut herself enormous slices of soft, pinkish lard, tore roast chickens apart with her clawlike fingers, and stuffed her mouth with hunks of fluffy white bread. Her cheeks glistened with fat. When she had finished, she let loose a loud, satisfied burp. She rarely climbed down off her chest, and even when she had to relieve herself she never took more than two or three steps away from the train. It was not only shameless, it was a sign of her utter contempt for everyone else.

The driver grunted and turned away, but he never said anything. He still hadn't got a crumb of her bread or a single taste of her lard. She insisted she wouldn't give him anything until he delivered her to Znamenka. All of us hated her with a passion stronger than the fear of death. A few of the passengers went so far as to pray for some gang to come along and shoot up the whole train. They were convinced the woman on her chest would be killed first since she made such a perfect target.

Somewhere past Bobrinets our dreams of vengeance were partly fulfilled. One evening our train came under fire from Makhno's men. Several bullets hit the marriage chest. The woman was unscathed, but some of the dowry was now full of holes. After that, the woman sat on the chest as though made of stone, her lips pressed together so tightly they turned blue, her eyes burning with such rage that none of the passengers dared to go near the engine unless absolutely necessary.

We kept waiting for revenge. I remembered Mama's famous belief in the great 'law of retribution'. When I mentioned it, the priests became all excited and were happy to confirm that such a law existed and was still in effect, even during our civil war. Lyusena, on the other hand, was equally certain there was no such law, but simply pathetic little men who lacked the courage to throw the woman and her chest off the nearest bridge into a nice deep river. And then, finally, it happened.

The 'Day of Retribution' was suitably dark and overcast. Ragged, black clouds tore with unbelievable speed over the barren fields. Sheets of rain beat like hail against the peeling walls of Znamenka station. It seemed as though the Goddess of Retribution herself had unleashed these angry clouds, this pelting rain, this wet wind.

It started with the woman giving the engine driver a single pound of lard and a single loaf of bread instead of the promised four pounds and two loaves. The driver didn't say a thing. He even thanked her and helped the fireman haul the chest down from the engine. The chest weighed a good five hundred

pounds, at least. It wasn't easy removing it from the train and setting it down on the track.

'Two healthy bulls and they can hardly lift a single chest. Drag it over here,' said the woman.

'Try it yourself,' said the driver. 'Damned thing's heavy. I need to go and get my crowbar.' He climbed into the cab, but instead of grabbing his crowbar, he released two scalding blasts of steam from either side of the engine. The woman screamed and jumped out of the way. The driver then put the train in motion and drove straight into the chest. It exploded with a sharp crash into a dozen pieces, and out flew in every direction the expensive dowry – a quilted bedspread, shirts, dresses, towels, knives, spoons, rolls of fabric and even a nickel-plated samovar. With a triumphant whistle, steam billowing, the engine drove over everything on its way to the water pump. The samovar was left as flat as a pancake. But the driver hadn't finished yet. He put the engine in reverse, coming to a stop directly over the remains of the dowry, at which point he let loose a shower of hot water mixed with engine oil.

The woman ripped off her shawl and began tearing at her hair before falling face first into a large puddle with a heart-rending wail. Her hands, which now held large clumps of hair, were shaking, and it looked almost as if she were trying to swim to the other side. Then she jumped up and threw herself at the driver. 'I'll tear your eyes out!' she screamed, rolling up her sleeves.

A few men grabbed her. A small man elbowed his way through the crowd. He consisted of new galoshes and an enormous checked cloth cap, from under which stuck a long, sharp nose. The woman's future son-in-law. He had arrived late to greet her at the station. He looked at the destroyed remains of the dowry, picked up the flattened samovar, tossed it at the woman's feet, and said in a high, grating voice: 'Dearest Mama, thank you ever so much for delivering the last of our things in such good condition.'

The woman turned, grabbed him by the front of his shirt and spat in his face. The crowd roared with laughter.

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We had stayed at Bobrinets for several days. The track up ahead, destroyed by Makhno, was being repaired. To the south, savage hordes of outlaws were laying waste to the countryside – roaring about on gun-carriages, shooting up everything before them with their machine-guns, looting, burning, raping, only to vanish at the first sight of serious resistance. The little towns of Ukraine, pink with hollyhocks and, until recently, quiet and traditional, now unleashed a wave of ataman-monsters. The bloody days of the 'Uman' had returned, swords flashed, slicing off of the heads of thistles one minute, men the next. Black flags emblazoned with white skull-and-crossbones fluttered in the wind over the once peaceful steppes north of the Black Sea. The Middle Ages paled before the brutality, violence and sudden unreason of the twentieth century.

Where had it all been hiding, slowly ripening, gathering strength and biding its time? No one could say. History was racing backwards. Everything had been thrown up into the air, and for the first time in many years, we all became aware of our helplessness before each other's inhumanity. Nazarov talked about this most of all. The priests kept quiet. Lyusena slept for days on end. As for Khvat, he didn't care for such conversations – they didn't provide good material for his witticisms.

The little town of Smela was four kilometres from Bobrinets. I had visited here once as a boy with my Aunt Nadya and met the bearded artist who was in love with her. The day after we stopped at Bobrinets, I walked to Smela. Visits back to the places of one's past tend to be melancholy experiences. The mood is deepened by those unexpected encounters with long-forgotten, and since altered, things, be it a crumbling old porch, a dying poplar or a rusty letter-box, where I had once posted a letter to my first love, a blue-eyed schoolgirl in Kiev.

Smela was quiet and empty. People tried to avoid going out for fear of running into Denikin's drunken soldiers. Just as in my childhood, the river Tyasmin was covered with a thick carpet of bright red duckweed that made it look like a fresh spring meadow. The smell of marigolds drifted from behind the fences.

All these places – including Smela and Cherkassy – were connected to the life of my family. As I strolled in Smela's quiet streets, my seemingly short life now suddenly stretched out before me into a long vista of crowded years. People apparently like to recall their past because from a distance everything becomes clearer. My own passion for exploring my memory arose too early, when I was still quite young, and turned into a kind of game. I didn't look back on my life as a series of connected events but liked to group things into various categories. So, for example, I would try to remember every hotel I had ever stayed at (actually, they were mostly just cheap lodging houses), or all the rivers I had seen, all the steamers I had sailed on, or every girl I might have fallen in love with.

This predilection proved to be not as silly as I had first supposed. Take hotels. I would try to retrieve

from my memory every last detail – the colour of the faded runners in the corridors, the wall-paper designs, the various smells, the prints on the walls, the faces of the maids, the way they talked, the worn bentwood furniture – everything right down to the inkwells made of stone from the Urals the colour of damp sugar which were always filled with a few dead flies but never any ink. As I remembered, I tried to see everything afresh, as though for the first time, and it was only later when I began to write that I realised how useful this was to my work.

I returned to the station at Bobrinets at dusk. I walked along one of the steep sides of the railway embankment. A full moon was rising. Gunshots rang out from the direction of Bobrinets. Suddenly, I could feel my heart beating faster. I was gripped by the notion of how fortunate I was to live in such an interesting moment in history, one full of contradictions and confusion, but also of great hopes. I told myself that I had indeed been born under a lucky star.

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Our train pulled into the station at Pomoshnaya early in the morning. We were immediately shunted to a siding at the far end, where piles of old slag were covered with the dry black stems of goosefoot. A short time later we jumped down from our wagon and to our surprise found that our engine had been uncoupled and was gone. There was not a soul to be seen up and down the many tracks or along the platforms. It was as though the station had died.

I went to explore. The air in the station building was cold and grey. All the doors were open, but I didn't see a single person in the waiting room, the buffet or the booking hall. The station appeared abandoned. After pacing the echoing stone floors, I went out into the main square, walked around to the back of the station, and came upon a rickety old door. I opened it. A man in a red cap, most likely the station guard, sat hunched over a desk in a narrow room with a high ceiling. He had pulled his hands up inside the sleeves of his frayed greatcoat and didn't make a move, but just glanced at me with a pair of small, inflamed eyes. Greasy strands of hair stuck out from under his red cap.

'What's happened?' I asked him. 'The station's deserted.'

He pulled his hands out of his sleeves and beckoned me mysteriously to the table. I went over. He grabbed my hand with his cold damp fingers and muttered softly: 'Everyone's fled into the steppe. I'm here all by myself. It wasn't even my shift, it was Bondarchuk's, but he's got a wife and children, the poor devil. And I've got nobody, so that's the way it is. He didn't ask me to, I volunteered to take his place.'

The man squeezed my hand tighter and tighter. I was getting nervous. He's mad, I thought, and pulled my hand away. He gave me a puzzled look and grinned. 'Afraid, are you?' he asked. 'Me too.'

'Of what?'

'A bullet,' said the guard. He stood up and began buttoning his coat. 'Nobody knows where it is now, but there's a bullet out there meant for my head. So, I just sit, and wait.'

He looked at the clock. 'Half an hour yet.'

'Until what?'

'Makhno's coming,' he said suddenly in a clear, loud voice. 'Understand? He'll be here in half an hour.'

'Where did you hear that?'

'From right here.' The guard pointed at the telegraph key on the table. 'From Edison. Before Edison, we led peaceful lives. Didn't know nothing but didn't care. Now we can see what's coming, and all that's done is cause us a lot of useless worry. Makhno's been beaten near Golta. He's heading back home, to Gulyaipole. He sent a telegram – he'll be passing through Pomoshnaya with three train-loads of his men. Not planning on stopping. Making for Zlatopol. Here's his order: "All points and signals to be left clear. Wait." If we don't, he'll shoot every last one of us on the spot. Here, look, it's right here in the telegram: "Blanket Execution by Firing Squad."' The guard pointed to the tangle of telegraph tape on the table and sighed. 'Let's just hope he passes quickly, the son of a bitch. Are you from the passenger train?'

I said yes and smiled – a hell of a passenger train that was! A collection of dirty, broken-down goods wagons that slumped from one side to the other as it plodded along on bent, rusty wheels.

'So, go back to the train and tell everyone to lock the doors and don't let Makhno see so much as the tips of their noses. If he does, you'll all be lined up in a ditch in front of a machine-gun before you know it.'

I returned to the train with this staggering piece of news. We immediately locked every door on the train and extinguished all the iron stoves so the smoke from the tin chimneys wouldn't give us away. Many of the passengers took comfort in the fact that between the main line and us stood a long empty goods train to provide cover. But Khvat and I weren't pleased with this arrangement – we both wanted to have a look at Makhno's men. Ducking behind coaches and sheds, we made our way over to the station.

The guard was happy to see us. In a situation like this, no one wants to be alone.

'Go over to the buffet. There's a good view of everything from the windows,' he said.

'And what about you?'

'I'll go out onto the platform and wave the train through with my green flag.'

Khvat looked at the guard doubtfully. 'Maybe it'd be best if you didn't go out,' he said.

'What are you talking about? I'm the station guard. If I don't, the engine driver will stop the train, and then it's farewell, my sweet little Dusya, you'll have to write to me in heaven.'

Khvat and I walked over to the buffet. We found a wooden board with a prehistoric timetable of departures and arrivals and moved it over to the window. We could hide behind it and watch without being seen. In case of danger, it was easy to reach the kitchen from the buffet and then from there slip down into a dark cellar.

A dingy tomcat with rusty spots came up the cellar stairs, gave us a passing glance, walked across the empty tables and counter, jumped onto the windowsill, sat down with his back to us, and, like ourselves, began to stare at the empty tracks. He was apparently displeased with all the strange goings-on in the station, for the tip of his tail never stopped twitching irritably. He bothered us, but we decided to let him be. We understood that he was a railway cat and had every right to sit here, whereas we, mere passengers, should know our place. Now and then, he shot us exasperated looks. Then he pricked up his ears, and we heard the emphatic whistle of an engine racing furiously towards the station. I pressed my face to the window and saw the guard. He rushed out onto the platform, straightened his coat and raised his furled green flag.

Blowing clouds of steam into the air, the train tore through the station, pulling a string of alternating goods and flat wagons. What went by on the open flat wagons struck me as raving madness.

I saw hideous, laughing young men all covered with weapons – curved sabres, broadswords, silver-hilted daggers, Colts, rifles and cartridge belts. Large black and red ribbons flew in the wind from tall astrakhan hats, caps, bowlers and every headdress imaginable. The largest ribbon, I noticed, had been stuck to a crumpled top hat. The owner, in a fur coat with the bottom cut off for greater freedom of movement, was firing into the air, apparently a salute to the station of Pomoshnaya, which was holding its breath in terror.

One of Makhno's men lost his boater in the wind. It rolled a long way down the platform before coming to a gentle stop near the guard's feet. The boater looked frivolous, despite its sinister black band. The dream of every provincial Don Juan, the hat must have until recently covered the parting atop some well-groomed barber's head. It's not hard to imagine that this dandyism had cost him his life. Next, a scrawny, hook-nosed sailor with a neck as long as a giraffe's swept past. His striped vest had been ripped down to his navel, obviously to show off the extravagant, menacing tattoo on his chest. It flashed by so fast that all I could make out was a tangle of women's legs, hearts, daggers and snakes. The faint outline had been filled in with pinkish ink almost the colour of strawberry juice. If I were to give it a style, I'd say it was Rococo.

The sailor was followed by a fat Georgian in green velvet riding breeches, a feather boa around his neck. He stood balanced on a gun-carriage alongside two machine-guns, their barrels pointing straight at us. The cat watched this travelling circus and quivered with delight, one minute putting out his claws, the next drawing them back in. After a drunk blond youth in a priest's stole who was clutching a roasted goose, an old man with a majestic head of white hair flowing out from beneath a school cap with its badge broken off whooshed solemnly by. He held in his hand a Cossack lance to which a torn black skirt had been tied. Painted on it was a white sunrise.

Every flat wagon flung snatches of sound onto the platform as it passed – the crying wail of an accordion, shrill whistles, a few words of a song. One song interrupted the next. 'Arise now, boys!' roared one wagon, 'To Patashon's Call' chorused another, while a third shouted: 'Rest in peace, rest in peace! That's the end of Rabinovich's wife, she's gone and lost her life!' After this the sad ending of the first song rose up: 'And who's that lying there under the green grave so proud?' to which the next wagon provided the mournful reply: 'One of Makhno's heroes, a saddle blanket for his shroud.'

The first troop train passed, followed immediately by the second. Gun-carriages turned upside down to face the sky created a forest of metal shafts that bounced and swayed with the movement of the wagons. Inside the goods wagons, scruffy horses stood in profile, shaking their heads. Instead of blankets, they were covered with tallits, Jewish prayer shawls. The horsemen sat on the flat wagons, legs dangling over the side. Yellow riding boots swung by, wellingtons, traditional felt *valenki*, sandals, worn-out shoes held in place with twine, silver spurs, expensive hussars' boots with officers' cockades on the sides, waders, orange slippers with pompoms, horny red feet, puttees cut from red plush or a billiard table's green baize.

Unexpectedly, the train slowed down. The guard looked around helplessly, but then drew himself up and froze. We moved back from the window, ready to run for our lives. But the train didn't stop. It moved on slowly, smoothly through the station. Another flat wagon came into view carrying nothing but a luxurious, highly polished landau with some prince's gilded coat of arms on the side. From one of the shafts, raised up like a flagpole, hung a black flag with the words 'Anarchy is the Mother of Order!' A machine-gun had been mounted in each of the wagon's four corners, next to which sat one of Makhno's men in a khaki-coloured English greatcoat.

A frail little man with a pallid green face in a black hat and an unbuttoned Cossack kaftan lay sprawled out on the landau's back seat of rich red morocco. His feet were propped up against the coach box, and his whole bearing suggested a lazy, calm, well-fed indifference. He had stretched out one of his arms and was playing with his Mauser, tossing it up into the air and catching it as it fell.

The sight of his face made me sick. A damp fringe hung over his low, frowning forehead. His eyes – at once vicious and vacant, the eyes of a skunk and a paranoiac – burned with malevolence. Even now, despite his relaxed and stately pose, he seemed to simmer with a fierce violence which permeated his being.

This was Nestor Makhno.

The guard, standing unnaturally stiff and erect, held out the green flag with his right arm, while saluting Makhno with his left. At the same time, he smiled. This smile was the most horrifying thing imaginable. It was not a smile at all. It was an abject supplication, a pitiful call for mercy, a desperate, terrified appeal to spare a poor life. Makhno lazily raised his Mauser and, without bothering to aim or even look at the guard, fired. Why, I don't know. Can anyone guess what goes on in the mind of a satanic monster?

The guard threw up his hands in a strange manner, stumbled, fell on his side and began to convulse on the platform, grabbing at his neck, which was spilling blood. Makhno waved his hand. Instantly, machine-gun fire raked the platform, hitting the guard. He twitched a few more times and then lay still.

We rushed out onto the platform. The last flat wagon was rolling past. A snub-nosed girl with cropped, curly hair, dressed in an astrakhan jacket and riding breeches, smiled from ear to ear and levelled her Mauser at us. The man next to her, his face covered in black stubble, a French steel helmet on his head, gave her a push. The bullet missed us and buried itself harmlessly in the wall. We ran up to the guard. He was dead. The imploring smile had frozen to his face. We lifted him, trying not to step in the large puddle of blood, and carried him to the buffet, where we laid him down on a long table next to a dried-out palm in a green pot. The soil in the pot bristled with yellowed cigarette butts.

It wasn't until the next morning that our train was able to leave for Golta. The priests were quiet and spent the entire day reading in whispers from their prayer books. Lyusena lay on her bunk, silent and staring at the watery sky through the open door. Khvat sat alone, frowning to himself. Nazarov was the only one who tried to make conversation, but he soon realised no one cared to talk and gave up.

We arrived in Golta a few hours after a pogrom. We heard that many Jews had been killed and were lying dead in the streets. We never found out who was responsible. None of us wished to go into town and see for ourselves.

In the middle of the night, Lyusena began to cry, softly at first, then louder and louder until she was sobbing hysterically. Towards dawn she calmed down. Later that morning, when we awoke at some halfway halt, Lyusena was gone. We searched the whole train but didn't find her. No one had seen her. She had vanished and left behind her bundle in the Gypsy shawl – it seemed she had no more use for it.

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Firinka, *Running Water and a Bit of Danger*

Firinka, a small Black Sea fish about the size of a large safety pin, was always fresh because it was the only fish for sale in the shops and all Odessa ate (or, as the more polite Southerners preferred, 'dined on') this little insignificant creature. But sometimes even *firinka* ran out. It was eaten raw, lightly salted, or minced and fried as fishcakes. The fishcakes could be eaten only when the alternative was starvation and, as the Odessans said, were best served 'with a garnish of tears'.

Nazarov and I (we were neighbours) were nearly broke. We lived on nothing but *firinka* and soggy maize bread. It looked like a grainy biscuit but tasted of pure aniseed. We had to thoroughly rinse our mouths to get rid of the intense taste of that bread. Once in a while I bought roast chestnuts. They were sold by weary old women in heavy fringed shawls who sat on low benches along the pavement, slowly stirring the nuts cooking in the braziers. The chestnuts crackled, burst and gave off an aroma of burnt bark, although sweeter and more fragrant.

Odessa was dark. The street lamps were lit very late or not at all, and so on many quiet autumn nights the only light was the fire of these braziers. The low-slung glow creeping over the pavements lent the city a certain magical quality. The old women wrapped themselves in shawls, while Odessa wrapped itself in fog. The whole autumn passed in this sea-fog shroud. I must admit, I've loved foggy days ever since, especially in the autumn when they are infused with the languid lemon yellow of fallen leaves.

It was extremely difficult to find lodgings in Odessa, but we were lucky. On Cape Langeron, in quiet, peaceful Chernomorskaya Street overlooking the sea, stood Dr Landesman's private sanatorium for nervous diseases. These anxious, unsettled times had produced a great rise in nervous disorders, but nobody had any money for treatment, especially in an expensive private clinic like Dr Landesman's, which is why it had been closed.

Nazarov had run into a woman he knew from Moscow, a neurologist, and she arranged for us to live in the empty sanatorium. Landesman, a majestic and exceedingly polite gentleman, offered us two small rooms with white walls in return for our acting as caretakers. It was our job to make sure no one chopped down the little orchard for firewood or dismantled the house and carted it away.

The central heating didn't work, and the little metal '*burzhuika*' stove could not warm my room with its exceptionally high ceiling and large windows. Firewood was almost impossible to come by. Now and then I managed to buy some acacia logs, which were sold by the pound. The most I could afford was a few pounds' worth. It was bitterly cold, especially when the winds blew out of the north. The sanatorium's walls of glazed white tiles made it feel even colder.

Once again, I got a job as a proofreader for a newspaper (I've forgotten its name). It was published by Academician Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky.[1] I worked every third day and earned very few 'bells' – the popular slang for Denikin paper roubles engraved with an image of the Tsar Bell in the Kremlin.

I enjoyed living in the echoing mansion by the sea. I liked the total solitude it provided and even the cold grainy air that smelled of salt. I read a lot, wrote some, and for lack of anything better to do, studied the fog. In the mornings, I went out into the garden and stood on the edge of the cliff over the sea. The invisible surf slowly rolled over the shingle. The foghorn blew dolefully and the bell tolled on the Vorontsov lighthouse. Small grey drops of dew shone on the long-withered grass and the branches of the acacias.

Ever since, fog has been associated in my mind with solitude, with a quiet life of concentration. It reduced the world to a small, visible circle, leaving only a few things available for observation – some trees, a gorse bush, a column of rough stone, an iron gate and an anchor chain lying for no apparent reason in a corner of the garden. It forced me to look at them longer and more carefully than we normally do, and I discovered in them many hitherto unnoticed details. The porous yellow stone was encrusted with tiny seashells and on the gorse a few flowers remained, sitting on straight, stiff branches like so many drenched, wrinkled golden butterflies waiting patiently for the sun. But it seldom showed through the fog and then only as a smudgy white blur that provided neither warmth nor shade. Under the one old plane tree, lemon-yellow splotches on its trunk, lay piles of leaves that looked as though cut from dull green velvet. Columns of ants scurried along the iron gate, carrying the last load of winter

supplies to their underground granaries, and beneath the anchor lived a timid little toad.

The fog had its own sounds. They appeared shortly before it melted away. It began with a vague rustling. The watery dust of sea spray merged to form drops which collected on the dark tree branches and then fell to the ground with faint plops. Next, a clear, echoing thunk was added to this soft music – the first drop of condensed fog had fallen from the roof and landed on the bottom of the upturned zinc tub below.

I loved the smell of fog as well, which carried with it a scent of coal smoke and steam. It was the smell of railway stations, of docks and ship decks – everything that spoke of travel, of long journeys over land and sea, of voyages through violet-blue light to distant pink islands bathed in the sweet aroma of lemons, of the raw wind and warning lights in the English Channel, of the rhythmic clatter of a train rolling through our slumbering Russian forests, of everything that captivates our frail human hearts.

In Odessa, I was seized by the idea of spending my whole life travelling so that I might live whatever years were granted me in the discovery of new things and people, and to use whatever talent I possessed to write books about my experiences and then give these books – books filled with the whole world in all its variety – to the young woman, as yet unmet, who would fill my life with joy and pain and wonderment at the beauty of the world, the world as it should be but so rarely is. At the time, I was certain that this would be my future. For a writer, to give to the beloved is to give to all humanity. I was convinced of this ill-defined law of generosity and of the need to give of oneself freely and completely. To give and not expect or ask for anything in return, no matter how small, this was all that mattered.

All I have just written is a lyrical digression. Literary critics like to warn writers against them: they upset the natural order of things and serve only to confuse readers, so they say. But it seems to me that there's no reason why one shouldn't write an entire book this way – freely and without the slightest constraint – submitting to nothing other than the uninterrupted flow of ideas and imagination. Perhaps this is the only way to achieve complete, total expression.

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All the same, I must get back to the *firinka*, the maize bread and that autumn in Odessa.

The lack of food never bothered me much, particularly after I acquired two tins of concentrated Dutch coffee from the cook on the French steamship *Dumont d'Urville*, then in port. I traded him a packet of Stamboli tobacco for it. The tobacco had once belonged to my father and for some reason Mama had saved it for years and later given it to me. The *Dumont d'Urville* was berthed next to an English destroyer at the Quarantine Pier. The sailors from the destroyer played football on the pier all day. The black and yellow steamers of the Lloyd Triestino line called regularly from Trieste and Venice. Groups of Greek sailors walked the streets of Odessa. Their blue uniforms, white gaiters with little round buttons and broad cutlasses looked old-fashioned and theatrical.

Odessa was full of an incredible mix of people that year. The smalltime stock exchange gamblers and black marketeers were overrun by an invasion of ruthless and brutal speculators fleeing from what they themselves spitefully called 'Sovdepia'. The local dealers could only shake their heads and sigh – gone were the good old days when a single crumpled bill of lading for a single wagonload of lemon extract in Arkhangelsk could change hands for a whole month among the patrons of the Fanconi Café, rising and falling in price so that everyone could make a turn 'on the difference'. Arkhangelsk was farther away than Mars, and lemon extract had long been a myth. But this didn't bother the black marketeers. Their dealings sounded like a loud game at the lunatic asylum. They haggled until they were hoarse, shook hands over deals, took umbrage, and at times this load of lemon extract or some equally mythical cargo of sponges (Porto Franco Patras, Greece) ended in loud and seemingly endless rows. Sometimes actual deals were made – for a package of saccharine, a batch of old braces or a suspicious-looking packet of sal ammoniac. At the time sal ammoniac wasn't cheap. It was a popular substitute for yeast.

But the speculators pouring in from the north put these peaceful, philosophical locals to shame with the sheer audacity of their deal making. Brilliant diamonds, from the tsar's own crown, of course; crisp new sterling and franc notes; luxurious scented furs straight from the shoulders of Petrograd's most famous beauties – all this and more passed into the hands of razor-stubbled Greek merchants. They did a particularly lucrative business selling the landed estates of the old nobility in provinces all over Mother Russia.

Every evening, one could see many well-known figures mingling with the flower girls on Deribasovskaya Street. Most of them, it was true, were looking rather shabby and agitated by the epidemic of outlandish rumours. In this respect, Odessa was way ahead of all the other southern towns. The rumours were indeed outlandish but frightening too. They blew into the city on the gusty north wind from the Kherson steppes. The Soviet army was charging south, demolishing covering forces, tightening

the noose around the Whites, cutting off their escape routes. The Whites' thin front line was breaking like rotten thread, one minute here, the next there.

Every time the front was broken, more deserters flooded into Odessa. Drunken noise filled the bars until morning – women shrieked, dishes crashed, shots rang out. The defeated tried to settle accounts and figure out who among them were the traitors responsible for Russia's destruction. The white skulls on the sleeves of the officers of the 'Death Battalions' were yellow with dirt and grease, and no longer scared anyone. The city lived from hand to mouth. According to official estimates, supplies of food and coal should have run out long ago, but, by some miracle, they hadn't. Only the city centre had electricity, and even there the lights did little more than flicker dimly. No one acknowledged the Whites' authority, including the Whites themselves.

Three thousand bandits from Moldavanka led by Mishka Yaponchik[2] looted lazily, clumsily, half-heartedly. They were sated with fabulous hauls from their previous raids and wanted to relax after this exhausting work. They joked more than they stole, they caroused in the restaurants, they cried as they sang the heart-rending song of the death of Vera Kholodnaya: 'Poor Runich weeps, / Over Vera's grave.'

Runich[3] had acted alongside Vera Kholodnaya. According to the lyrics, Vera begs him from her grave:

> In bright cornflowers blue,
> Do wreathe my cold breast.
> With tears of love so true
> Show that you loved me best.

One evening I walked back home to Chernomorskaya Street from the editorial office with Yakov Lifshitz, a journalist from Petrograd. Homeless, Lifshitz joined us as the third lodger at Dr Landesman's. A short, dishevelled, restless man, he was known as 'Yasha on Wheels'. This was because when he walked, he rolled from heel to toe with a strange rocking motion, something like a blotter absorbing ink on paper. Yasha didn't appear to be walking but gliding as though on roller skates. His shoes even looked like ink blotters – the soles were bent in a convex arc.

'Yasha on Wheels' and I walked along, picking the small side streets and lanes to try to avoid the patrols. In one of them, two young men in matching jockey caps came out of a doorway. They stopped to have a smoke. We were walking right towards them, but they made no sign of moving. It looked as though they were waiting for us.

'Thugs,' I whispered to Yasha.

He snorted at this and said: 'Nonsense! Thugs don't work deserted streets like these. We need to check.'

'How?'

'By talking to them. It's obvious.'

Yasha had a pet theory – always approach danger head on. He was convinced that this theory had saved him from many a tight spot.

'What are we going to talk to them about?' I asked, puzzled.

'Any old thing. It makes no difference.'

Yasha walked quickly up to the two men and asked them out of the blue: 'Could you tell me, please, how to get to Chernomorskaya Street?'

The young men began to politely explain it to him. It was complicated, and so it took them a long time to describe the route, especially because Yasha kept interrupting them. Finally, Yasha thanked them, and we went on our way.

'There now, you see,' said a triumphant Yasha. 'My theory never fails.'

I agreed with him, and then, the very next moment, we heard the men call us. We stopped. They came up and one of them said: 'You do know, of course, that everyone who goes past Alexandrovsky Park, which you'll have to do to get to Chernomorskaya, is robbed of their coat?'

'Really, *everyone's* coat?' Yasha said with a laugh.

'Well, almost everyone,' the young man corrected himself and smiled. 'They'll steal yours. That's for sure. So, it's better you take it off now. It can't make any difference to you whether you lose it here in Kanatny Lane or at the park, right?'

'Well, I guess you're right . . .' said Yasha, all flustered.

'How nice of you. Now please be so kind.'

The young man flicked a knife out of his sleeve. I had never in my life seen such a long, beautiful knife. It was as sharp as a razor. He held it close to Yasha's stomach.

'If it's not too much trouble,' the man with the knife said, 'please remove everything from the pockets you might need, except money. Wonderful! I thank you. Goodnight! No, please, don't bother,' he said, turning to me, 'one coat is plenty for us. Greed is the mother of all sins. On your way then, and don't

look back. It never pays to look back, does it?'

We walked home, not terribly upset by what had just happened. The whole way Yasha kept waiting for someone to come and take my coat, but no one ever did. He became gloomy after a while and angry with me, as though it were my fault they took his coat and not mine. I got the feeling he actually wondered whether I had been in cahoots with the two thieves.

In general, Yasha was extremely unlucky. Nazarov always tried to convince us that Yasha was a Jonah. As proof, he offered two incidents. Unfortunately, I could not refute their veracity because I had seen them with my own eyes. The first involved a large jug of water, the second a thermometer.

At the time, Odessa was experiencing an acute water shortage. It had to be brought all the way from the river Dniester, over sixty kilometres away. The water pump on the Dniester was barely working. It had been shot up and attacked by numerous gangs. Odessa was hanging by a thread – it might be left without water at any moment. There was still water in the pipes, sometimes, but only in the areas of the city closest to sea level. Long queues of people from all over Odessa trudged to these more fortunate neighbourhoods from dawn until dusk, carrying with them every sort of pail, bucket, pitcher and kettle. Only a lucky few – the owners of carts – arrived with barrels to fetch water. We both envied and hated them, despite the fact that they had to harness themselves to their carts. It was painful to watch as they puffed and panted their way up the hills or chased, horrified, after these same carts when they got away from them and began careering back downhill, spilling a good half of the water.

We took turns fetching water over on Uspenskaya Street, a couple of kilometres away. I knew every cellar with a tap on that street so well I could find them all blindfolded. As we queued we heard all the latest news and gossip and the 'regulars' greeted each other as though they were dear old friends. The poet Vera Inber lived near us in shady Observatorny Lane.[4] She always fetched water with the same vase, made of frosted, multi-coloured glass and decorated with purple irises in relief. Inber, a slight, frail woman, slipped one day and broke her vase. The following day, however, she was back with another one just like it. Out of sheer compassion, I carried the vase of water back home for her. Inber's fear that I would drop and break this last vase of hers was exhausting and made my legs shake.

Quite naturally, I had to be careful carrying all that water. I always watched my footing and so came to learn everything there was to know about the roads and pavements between Chernomorskaya and Uspenskaya Streets. I became convinced that looking down as I walked was an alluring and at times even useful activity. There were a good many little objects to see, all of which stimulated various thoughts and ideas. Some of these objects were pleasant, some indifferent, and some were bad.

The worst, and most common, were drops, and at times whole pools, of blood and Mauser cartridges. The cartridges had an acrid smell of gunpowder. Empty purses and torn documents were also bad. Those were less common, however. There were fewer pleasant objects, but they were more varied. Typically, they were utterly unexpected – dried flowers from a bouquet, fragments of cut glass, desiccated crab claws, empty packets of Egyptian cigarettes, little girls' hair ribbons, rusty fishhooks. They all spoke of a world at peace. The tufts of grass growing up here and there between the paving stones also counted among the pleasant things. As did the little flowers, most of them withered, and the round flat stones in the cement gutters washed clean by the rain. Most of the objects belonged to the indifferent category – buttons, copper coins, pins, cigarette butts. No one paid them any attention.

We poured our water into a large glass jug in the hall. One day, Yasha left his room and started screaming wildly. I rushed out into the hall and witnessed something inexplicable: right in front of Yasha and me, our enormous jug slowly began to tip over, pausing for a few seconds like the Tower of Pisa, before falling onto the floor and shattering into a thousand pieces. Our precious water ran gurgling down the stairs. We could have caught the jug, but for some reason we just stood there without moving as though bewitched.

The second incident, with the thermometer, was even stranger. I fell ill with Spanish flu. Thermometers in Odessa were as rare as pineapples. There was only a handful of them in the entire city. People treasured their thermometers no less than shipwrecked sailors treasure their last match.

Nazarov asked to borrow one for a couple of days from our editor, the illustrious Academician Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky. As a celebrated humanitarian and venerable guardian of Russia's liberal traditions, Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky could not possibly say no. Biting his lips and groaning (the strongest expressions of displeasure he ever made), he gave Nazarov the thermometer with strict instructions to wrap it in cotton wool and keep it safely stored in a drawer. Nazarov, Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky warned, must cherish the thermometer like the apple of his eye.

Nazarov took my temperature, but he forgot about Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky's instructions. He put the thermometer down on my bedside table and went off into town. I fell asleep. Yasha woke me up. He tried to open the door carefully, but it made a loud squeak. I glanced at the table and could feel the hair on

my head rise – the thermometer had started to roll slowly to the edge of the table. I wanted to scream but couldn't. I saw the look of terror in Yasha's eyes. He too was watching the thermometer, motionless. It rolled off the table, fell and shattered on the floor. My fever broke, no doubt from the shock. I recovered almost immediately.

We racked our brains for a long time about how we were going to find another thermometer. The next two days Nazarov called in sick to avoid running into Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky. In the end, we had to resort to crime. We found the key to Dr Landesman's office and found a thermometer in his desk drawer. To put it in the evasive language of thieves, we 'took' it (thieves never like to use the word 'steal') and returned it to Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky.

After these two incidents, Nazarov tried to convince me that Yasha was dangerous and urged me never to go out with him again. I just laughed at him, for which I was soon to be cruelly punished. In order to explain precisely what happened, I must first say a few words about Sturdzovsky Lane. It led to Chernomorskaya Street and was impossible to avoid.

This little street, named after the famous Alexander Sturdza, a contemporary of Pushkin, always evoked in us a sense of hidden danger, perhaps because the sides were lined with nothing but tall garden walls made of heavy stone, behind which large gardens stretched all the way to a high cliff overlooking the sea. The long, blank walls up and down Sturdzovsky Lane offered no protection, no cover. In those days, before walking down any street, we had all developed the habit of scoping out the quickest places to hide or take shelter from gunfire or drunken patrols. There wasn't a single hiding place on Sturdzovsky Lane, unless one counted a sole two-storey house with its deeply recessed doorway. The house stood abandoned. Weeds grew out of the broken windows.

I paid Nazarov no heed, and late one autumn night walked back home again with Yasha from the office. Walking the streets at night required strict observance of a number of unwritten laws. First of all, no smoking, no talking, no coughing. Second, walk quietly, minimising the sound of one's feet. Third, stick close to the walls or in the shadows of trees. Fourth, every forty or fifty steps, stop, look and listen, being sure to search the darkness for any movement. And fifth, at every intersection, scan the cross street to see that it was clear and then make a quick dash to the other side.

We made it safely to Sturdzovsky Lane, and then stopped at the corner, listening and peering into the inky darkness for a long time to make sure the coast was clear. On the one hand, the darkness helped us to hide. On other hand, it also helped the enemy to hide. There was the danger of walking straight into a trap.

Everything was quiet, so quiet we could even hear the faint rumble of the surf. We crept stealthily down the lane. Before we set out, I had told Yasha that we should make our way down the side of the street with the doorway, stop before we reached it, and then quickly and quietly dart past it. I had worked it out mathematically. If anyone was hiding in the doorway, they might well not see us coming. If we went down the other side of the lane, however, they could see us from a good way off. According to my calculation, if we walked on the other side, we would be in sight of the enemy five times longer. Thus, the danger to us would be five times greater.

But Yasha had countered my theory with his own, namely that it's always better to face danger head-on. Even though we had been whispering, I didn't argue with him for the simple reason I didn't want to risk being discovered, and so we set off down the side of the street opposite the doorway.

Yasha counted the seconds to himself. We knew it took seven minutes to walk from Sturdzovsky Lane to Dr Landesman's. We always felt safe once we were back at the sanatorium, behind its high wall and iron gates, especially if we made sure not to light the oil lamps. As we were passing the doorway, Yasha stumbled. Whenever we talked about this incident later, Yasha always insisted that the more you concentrate on doing something perfectly, the more likely you are to make some foolish mistake. As for me, I was convinced it was all due to his absurd way of walking. But I never told him this to spare his feelings. Anyway, Yasha stumbled, and he was so shocked that instead of cursing silently to himself, he blurted out 'Sorry!' in a loud, embarrassed voice.

'Don't move!' shouted a husky voice from the doorway. The sharp beam of an electric torch hit us squarely in the face. 'Hands out of your pockets! Now! You bastards!'

Several armed men came up to us. It was a Cossack patrol.

'Papers!' said the man with the husky voice.

I handed him my identity card. The Cossack shone his torch on it and then on me. 'Damned foreigner! Greek, most likely,' he said. 'Mackerel with a slice of lemon, that's what you are. This is obviously fake. Here, take it.'

He handed back my identity card and then shone the light on Yasha. 'Don't even bother showing me your papers,' he said. 'Anyone can see you're a general in the Jerusalem army. Go on, get out of here!'

We walked on a few paces.

'Stop!' the same Cossack shouted suddenly in a shrill voice. 'Don't move!'

We stopped.

'What are you dawdling for? Didn't I tell you to get a move on?'

We started walking again, slowly, trying to hide our fear. Every nerve in my body was stretched tight. I could feel the barrels of their guns trained on our backs even though I hadn't heard the clicking of the bolts. I realised now they were playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with us. They were going to kill us, and any moment might be our last.

'Stop! You motherf——rs!' the Cossack screamed again.

The other men snickered.

We stopped again, this time alongside the wall. I couldn't see it in the dark, but I knew it was made of rough stone and so there must be places to grab hold of.

'Over the wall,' I whispered to Yasha. 'In one go. Otherwise we're dead.'

I was thin and light. It was easy for me to climb over the wall. But Yasha, with his big, heavy roller-skate shoes, nearly fell off. I grabbed his hand and pulled. We threw our legs over the top of the wall and jumped. Shots rang out behind us, and chunks of rock exploded along the top of the wall. We raced through the dark garden. The tree trunks had been treated with white lime, which helped us to find our way. The Cossacks had climbed the wall by now and were on our tails. A bullet whistled past my ear. We made it to the wall on the far side of the garden. There was a gap in it. The Cossacks were now running through the garden, but they wasted time aiming and firing their rifles and so we managed to squeeze through the gap. Another three paces and we were on the edge of a steep cliff over the sea.

We scrambled down the cliff and took off running along the shore. The Cossacks kept firing from up above but had lost us by now in the darkness. We picked our way for some time down the shoreline, over large rocks and past dark caves. The surf drowsily rolled up on the shingle. It was hard to believe that a man could kill another man just like himself for no good reason on such a warm autumn night filled with the scent of thyme and the gentle sounds of the whispering sea. I was still naïve enough to believe that beauty could appease evil and that murder was impossible before the Sistine Madonna or atop the Acropolis.

I was dying for a smoke. The shooting had stopped, so we climbed into the first cave and lit our cigarettes. Never in my life have I enjoyed a cigarette more. We sat in the cave for about three hours before coming out and walking stealthily along the rocky shore towards the sanatorium. All was quiet. Clinging to the rocks and bushes, we climbed up the cliff to the high fortress-like wall of the sanatorium. We located a culvert, slithered through it, stuffed it full of rocks behind us, even though this was completely unnecessary, and went inside.

Nazarov was not asleep. He was stunned by our tale. We went into the windowless bathroom, lit the oil lamp and got our first look at ourselves. Our clothes were all torn, our hands cut and bleeding, but on the whole, we were lucky to be alive. We gulped down lots of tea and got drunk. Not from the tea, of course, but from an amazing, incomparable feeling of lightness that came from being safe. If perfect happiness exists, we experienced it that night.

I wanted to hold onto this feeling as long as possible. I changed my clothes, grabbed a blanket and went out to the loggia – a deep bay with a projecting balcony on the first floor. It was dark there and protected from the wind. No one could see me from the street below. I lay down on a wicker chaise longue, wrapped the blanket around me and stayed there until dawn, listening to the sounds of the night.

The sea murmured without end. The sound of the large breakers rose and fell. So did the wind in the bare branches. It rose and fell, becoming as quiet as me, listening throughout the night. But the wind never left, it remained with me. I could tell by the smell of the wet shingle and the subtle trembling of the last leaf on the plane tree. I had noticed that stubborn grey leaf the day before, but now, at night, it seemed a tiny living creature, my one friend, keeping vigil beside me.

Now and then gunshots echoed in the dark from somewhere off in the city. After each shot, dogs barked for a long time. Once a faint light flickered far out at sea and then vanished. Everything around me slept. I too dozed off occasionally, but my sleep was fitful. It was the kind of half-sleep when one can clearly see large white flowers floating on a dark sea or hear the sound of a violin, soft as a child's hand. In that half-sleep I felt completely different from my usual self – extremely calm, trusting, accepting of the world. From the darkness of the sea, I was certain I could hear a woman whispering:

> So, what does my name mean to you?
> It's certain to die like a mournful roar,
> Like waves splashing on a distant shore,

A forest noise before the night is through.[5]

[1] Dmitry Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky (1853–1920), noted linguist, literary scholar and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

[2] Mishka Yaponchik (1881–1919, b. Moisei Volfovich Vinnitsky), legendary Jewish gangster, revolutionary and Soviet military commander, killed in the civil war.

[3] Osip Runich (1889–1947, b. Osip Fradkin), early silent film star who acted alongside Vera Kholodnaya. Runich left Russia after her death in 1919 for Europe and then Africa.

[4] Vera Inber (1890–1972), poet and translator, especially remembered for her diary of the Leningrad blockade.

[5] Opening stanza of an untitled poem from 1830 by Pushkin.

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The Last Shot

With each passing day, life in Odessa became more alarming. Soviet forces had almost reached Voznesensk by now.

Ships swarming with refugees were leaving for Constantinople. Almost all these ships – dirty, rusty, black paint peeling from their sides – chugged their way out of port low in the water, listing to one side, and belching thick black smoke that blanketed all of Langeron and our Chernomorskaya Street. But the newspapers still came out. The White authorities knew that the end was no more than hours away, but they did everything in their power to hide the fact from the civilians, especially the refugees from the north. The papers carried telegrams stating that the Bolshevik advance had been stopped and that French troops with artillery and poison gas were on their way to Odessa from Thessaloniki.

These rumours were spread to try to stop the crush of panicked refugees fleeing to the south in the hope of reaching Constantinople, which would hamper the White Army's escape. Only a few ships were left in port, and Denikin's men were saving them for themselves. The officers, who had long ago given up all hope, could be found at the Yellow Canary Café reading stories in the papers that kept trying to convince everyone of the hackneyed expression from the days of Napoleon's invasion that 'Moscow has burned down, but Russia still stands'. The newspaper where I worked kept rehashing this same theme in every last article, editorial and poem.

One day Bunin dropped into our office. He was worried and wanted to know what was happening at the front. He stood in the doorway, struggling to take off the glove on his right hand. It was a cold, rainy day, and the wet kid glove had stuck to his fingers. Finally, he pulled it off and, after scanning our small, smoky room with his grey eyes, said: 'No, not much of a place you have here.'

For some reason we felt put out.

'What do you expect, Ivan Alexeevich?' Nazarov replied. 'We've already got one foot in the grave.'

'By the way,' said Bunin, 'you don't happen to know where that expression comes from, do you?'

'No, I don't.'

'Oh well, anyway – you're right. We've reached the end!' he said and then paused. 'Rain, cold, darkness, but my heart's at peace. Or rather, it's empty. Like death.'

'Feeling low, Ivan Alexeevich?' asked Nazarov cautiously.

'No, not really,' Bunin answered. 'It's just the world's become such an uncomfortable place. Even the sea smells of rusty iron.' He got up and went to our editor's office.

I had loved Bunin since a boy for his gloomy, merciless precision; for his devotion to Russia, his incredible knowledge of its people, his profound admiration of the world in all its diverse beauty, his vigilance; and for his own clear, unmistakable understanding that happiness is everywhere, but only for those who know it. Even then Bunin for me belonged to the classics. I knew many of his poems by heart and sections of his prose as well. My favourite work of his for its bitter suffering and unerring language was 'Elijah the Prophet', a short story of no more than two or three pages. Given all this, I was terror-struck and didn't dare to so much as utter a word in his presence. I lowered my head, listening to his monotone voice, glancing up at him rarely, fearful of catching his eye.

Many years later I read his *Life of Arseniev*. For me, some of its chapters belong to the finest poetry and prose ever written, especially the passage where Bunin writes about the bones of his mother, buried in the cold clay earth of Yelets, about the inevitable loss of the people we love most, and about the despair and loneliness all of us know in our hearts. He knew how to use simple, painful words:

> A widow wept one night –
> She'd loved the baby tenderly, but it had died.
> The old neighbour wept too, pressing his sleeve to his eyes,
> The stars shone, and the kid wept in the sty.
> A mother wept in the night.
> Her night tears led another to cry.
> The stars fall like tears from the night sky,

The Lord weeps, pressing his sleeve to his eyes.

Bunin soon left. I could not work any longer, correcting the illiterate, fabricated scribblings of the Odessa reporters, and so I went home to Chernomorskaya Street.

A black wind blew from the leaden sea. Sullen curtains of rain hung over the water. The acacia leaves that had once floated on the clear puddles had all drowned. Now they lay under the water, covering the pavement in thick, yellow layers of rot. Only the wet ivy in the back gardens glistened, offering proof of life. I walked towards the sea, down towards the Arcadia district. The watery desert swirled and washed silently upon the smooth sand. The vast, bleak gloom of the autumn sea flooded me with a diffuse and cold sense of anguish, which I did not resist.

How many times had I looked back upon my life? Now, going over it year by year once again, I realised that nothing but the future could give meaning, direction and justification to my disjointed and conflicted past. Perhaps the future would sift from my life, from all that I had experienced, everything touched by genuine human warmth and poetry and help me to stitch these untidy fragments into a meaningful, coherent story. And who knows, just maybe this story might answer some need in others as well and not only in me, helping them through their own personal storm to a distant patch of sunlight amid the dark clouds. I could see such a patch ahead of me, slowly spreading over the sea to the south and promising to release the pale autumn sun from its gloomy captivity.

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Overnight, the clouds dispersed, and in the morning I awoke to an improbably blue sea outside my windows. A thin, sharp northeaster was blowing, bringing with it as always cold, clear skies. The withered grass, covered in shining, ringing hoar-frost, twisted in the wind. Slow, heavy surf pounded the sea cliffs, leaving behind a white crust of ice. The wind tore dollops of salt foam as thick as whipped egg whites from the tops of the waves. Ragged mounds of it billowed and quivered on the beach, and it was easy to believe the ancient Greeks that it had given birth to Aphrodite.

My leisurely thoughts were interrupted by the thunder of artillery. It slammed down on the city like a great iron paw. The whole sanatorium shook and rattled, tiles fell from the roof, crashing into pieces on the ground. This shot was followed by a second, then a third, and a fourth . . .

A French battle cruiser anchored in the roadstead was firing into the steppe. The shells flew over the city and exploded so far away that the sound didn't reach Odessa. Looking out of my window, I saw 'Yasha on Wheels' race into the yard. He opened the stairway door and shouted at the top of his lungs, his words echoing through the empty building: 'The Bolsheviks have broken through over by the Tiligul estuary. They've almost reached Kuyalnik. It's all over!'

Kuyalnik was only a few kilometres east of Odessa.

Yasha ran into my room. Nazarov followed. Yasha, still shouting, said that the Whites had fled without firing a single shot. There was panic in the port, the French cruiser was firing blindly into the steppe, and we had to immediately throw a few essentials into a small bag and hurry to the port. They had already started loading the steamers.

'Well, okay then,' I told him. 'Go. It's up to you and your conscience. As for me, I cannot imagine giving up on my country, or my people, no matter what.'

'True,' said Nazarov. 'Life without Russia would be meaningless for me. But Yasha, if your life is so precious, although I'm not sure to whom, run along. To hell with you.'

'Nonsense!' Yasha muttered. He turned red and tears appeared in his eyes. 'It's just that everybody's fleeing. Maybe I just got carried away. You know I'm not going anywhere.'

There was little time to think. A moment of hesitation could save one's life or destroy it. Yasha ended up staying. He was visibly relieved not to have to think about it anymore. He put on some water for tea. We drank a quick cup and then headed off to Alexandrovsky Park. From the park's old pavilion on the edge of a cliff one had a clear view of the entire port and all that was going on down there.

For a long time after I could not shake the haunting impression that I had already witnessed this epic flight in a painting by some pitiless artist: those mouths, twisted in cries for help; eyes bulging from their sockets; green, deeply etched faces gripped by the fear of death; the blind terror when people can see only one thing – the rickety ship's gangway with its handrails snapping under the crush of human bodies; rifle butts crashing down on heads; mothers holding up their crying babies in outstretched arms over the crazed human herd; a woman trampled underfoot, still writhing and screaming on the quay . . .

People were literally destroying each other, preventing even those who had reached the gangway and grabbed the railing from saving themselves. I saw one lucky man take hold of the railing only to be immediately clutched at by many hands. He inched his way forward, dragging these people along with

him up the gangway, but then lost his hold and fell together with the others still clinging to his body into the sea. Unable to free himself from this terrible human load, he went down into the water and disappeared.

All the roads leading to the port were jammed with crowds of people. The throngs seemed too big for the roads to handle, and it looked as though the fences and houses might be crushed at any moment. That would have helped to save lives, but the houses were all made of heavy stone and didn't give way. Instead, one heard the constant breaking of glass and splintering of timber as people were squeezed through windows and doors.

Crushed suitcases, bundles and baskets slithered downhill underfoot like grotesque living creatures. Clothes were spilling out and winding themselves around people's feet. Women's lace and nightgowns, children's frocks and ribbons trailed behind the fleeing mass, and the sight of these homely things made their flight seem even more tragic. Cold clouds of dust hung over the roads.

Groups of officers and soldiers scattered and were lost in the crowds of civilians, and only the felt cloaks of the men from the Caucasus stood out in the crowd, swinging like black bells and making it difficult for them to run. The men tore off their cloaks and threw them in the air, where they hung for a moment, caught by the wind, as though gliding on their own like so many flying carpets down to the port.

A jet of steam spurted up into the murky sky over the bridge of one of the steamers, followed by a heavy, shuddering whistle. Immediately taking up the sound, all the other ships began whistling in various keys. This was the chorus of departure. It sounded like a prayer for the dying, for those who were departing their homeland and their people, leaving Russia's fields and woods, her springtimes and winters, renouncing their share in our common suffering and joy, in our past and present, in the genius of Pushkin and Tolstoy, and in that great filial love we all feel for our beautiful land.

Soviet cavalry had by now made their way into the city. Several of the horsemen had ridden out to the end of the breakwater, where they now sat motionless on their horses. A minesweeper, convoying the ships, fired two pointless rounds that exploded over the city with a thin crack. This was their parting gift. The Soviet guns did not return fire.

Silent crowds stood on the breakwaters, the boulevards and the bluffs over the sea, watching the heavy hulks of the departing ships grow dim in the smoke and dusk. The silence of the victors conveyed a painful reproach. Before long, the ships disappeared in the mist. The winter wind was blowing again from the north-east, as though turning over a new page. On it was to be written a heroic story of Russia – long-suffering, unique and beloved to our dying breath.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

I first encountered *The Story of a Life* in the spring of 1982 in a bookstore in Burlington, Vermont. I was a freshman at the university there and had begun studying Russian the previous autumn. Prior to that I had not read a single Russian author and knew almost nothing about the country, but my language studies had introduced me to a fascinating world that I was eager to discover.

For some reason I don't recall, the book caught my eye, and after reading the impressive endorsements on the back cover, I decided to give it a try. From the opening lines, I was enthralled. If most readers fall in love with Russia by way of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Chekhov, for me it was Paustovsky. I inhaled the book in a few days and started pressing my copy on everyone I knew, insisting with all the fervour of a proselyte that they read it. A year or so later I put the book into the hands of an acquaintance, who then lent it to a friend. I never saw the book again.

Decades passed and I found myself one day walking through Moscow's Kuzminki Park. I came upon a wooden blue-grey house tucked in a growth of trees off the main allée. Curious, I approached and was surprised to see it was a museum to Paustovsky. I went inside and found myself transported back to 1982 and my discovery of him and his work. Now able to read *The Story of a Life* in the original, I bought a copy and experienced a similar sensation of amazement, although deepened by the knowledge of the language, people and their history gained over the years.

After some research, I learned that *The Story of a Life* had long been out of print in English and contemplated coordinating the publication of a new edition. First, however, I decided to compare the Russian text against the existing translations. I had read Joseph Barnes's translation published by Pantheon Books in New York in the spring of 1964 and reissued in paperback in 1982.[1] Reading Barnes's rendering again I recalled my initial amazement at Paustovsky's work, but was disappointed by how flat-footed, awkward and frustratingly literal the translation was. Nearly every page contained an error or two and it was obvious that in many instances Barnes had misunderstood the Russian original and ended up producing sentences that either were wrong or distorted Paustovsky's meaning. And Barnes had nearly always ignored the many instances of verse quoted by Paustovsky and left them out of his translation.[2]

A few months after the American publication in 1964, Harvill Press in London published *The Story of a Life: Childhood and Schooldays*, the first volume of Paustovsky's hexalogy, in a translation by Manya Harari and Michael Duncan. Harari, the translator (with Max Hayward) of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, as well as works by Ilya Ehrenburg and Yevgenia Ginzburg, was a co-founder of Harvill. Together with Duncan and then Andrew Thomson, Harari translated the next three volumes – *Slow Approach of Thunder* (1965), *In that Dawn* (1967) and *Years of Hope* (1968). After Harari fell ill in 1967 with the cancer that would take her life, Harvill commissioned Kyril Fitzlyon to translate the final volumes, published as *Southern Adventure* (1969) and *The Restless Years* (1974).

The Harvill translations are superior to Barnes's work, but they are not without fault. Like his translation, the first three volumes were done when Paustovsky was still alive and there was the hope that he might win the Nobel Prize. Speed was of the essence, and in the rush to complete the translations as quickly as possible, a great many errors and omissions made their way into the Harvill publications as well.

Clauses, sentences, paragraphs and even an entire chapter – 'Here Lives Nobody' in volume two – have been omitted. Names are incorrectly rendered (an Ivanov becomes a Karavaev in the chapter 'Artillerymen'), animals change species ('clouds of fry' become 'a flock of water birds' in 'The Zone of Silence'), places are muddled (Kobrin becomes Brest in 'Treason'), numbers get scrambled (the consumptive Glasha loses eight years of her life and is made seventeen instead of twenty-five in 'The Suburb of Chechelevka'). Errors like these appear throughout.

One also notices in the Harvill translations a tendency to tone down the emotional colour of Paustovsky's prose, as if the translators feared his intensity and range of feeling might be a bit much for British sensibilities. Perhaps out of a concern not to offend against good taste, certain elements, such as Pan Kturenda's gonorrhoea in 'The Violet Ray', are silently omitted.

It became obvious that a new, improved translation was warranted. Initially, I planned to do an abridged translation of all six volumes, something that has been done before with other massive works, such as Alexander Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.[3] But I

decided against this for two reasons. First, I found it impossible to decide which sections or chapters could be deleted without denying the reader the pleasure they afforded or without needing to add extensive notes and commentary to fill in the gaps caused by these redactions. Inserting my voice alongside Paustovsky's would only diminish the text. Second, after examining the publication history of *The Story of a Life*, it became clear that volumes five and six had been thoroughly bowdlerised by Paustovsky's Soviet editors and never did appear in print as he had wished. Any future translation of the final volumes should be undertaken only after a complete study of Paustovsky's manuscripts held in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow.

Paustovsky conceived of each volume of his memoirs as a discrete work and so excluding the final three volumes in no way violates the author's intentions. Moreover, as has been noted before, the first three volumes form a clear trilogy that follow Paustovsky's life from childhood through the revolution and civil war, ending with the Soviet victory, while the second trilogy is set in the early years of the newly formed Soviet state.[4]

Paustovsky revised his memoir throughout his life, and it has been published in Russia many times over the past fifty years in various editions. This translation is based on the latest and most authoritative text of *The Story of a Life*, published by TERRA in Moscow in 2017.[5]

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The names of the streets, villages, towns, cities and even countries mentioned in *The Story of a Life* have in many instances changed from the time when Paustovsky lived and wrote. The multinational empire Paustovsky was born and grew up in collapsed in 1917. It was then reconfigured in the early 1920s, only to collapse again in the 1990s. The successive waves of political and social upheaval brought with them linguistic changes as well. This poses challenges for the translator. What, for example, is one to do with a street that has had four different names? Paustovsky writes about Kiev's Bibikovsky Boulevard, as it was called from 1869 to 1919, but before that it was known as Bulvarnaya Street from 1834 to 1850 and Shosseiny Boulevard from 1850 to 1869, and was only given its present name, Taras Shevchenko Boulevard, in 1919. Kiev is now Kyiv, Gorodishche is now Horodyshche, Yekaterinoslav is now Dnipro. The list goes on and on.

Instead of updating geographical place names to reflect current usage, I have chosen to use the ones Paustovsky gives in his memoir. Although this may offend some readers, my decision to stick with the Russian names is not in any way intended as a slight; rather it is driven by the desire to best capture the author's voice, which, after all, is a Russian one, and to most accurately reflect the world he so evocatively describes in his work.

Paustovsky would have been the first to acknowledge that Ukrainians, Belorussians and Poles had different names for the places he wrote about, and his choices were in no way intended as signifiers of some insistent Russian nationalism; they simply express his own personal lived experience. Readers curious to know the current spelling of locations mentioned in the text should consult the appended 'Guide to Place Names'.

In transliterating the Russian, I have used a modified Library of Congress system, ignoring hard and soft signs and simplifying most endings (e.g., *–sky*, not *–skii*). The letter *ë* signifies an iotated *o* that sounds like the *yo* in 'your'.

All notes and translations, including song lyrics and verse, are my own, except for the line from Igor Severyanin's 'Trait upon Trait' in *Restless Youth*, which was generously provided by Boris Dralyuk.

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My literary agent, Melissa Chinchillo, and the diligent staff at Fletcher and Company tracked down the

English language rights to Paustovsky's works and skilfully negotiated the publication of this new translation. At Vintage Classics UK, I thank Frances Macmillan and Nicholas Skidmore. Jonathan Wadman did a masterful job copy-editing the text, as did Anthony Hippisley with the proofread. My work was funded in part by a generous fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

As always, my greatest debt is to my family – Stephanie, Emma and Andrew. I wish to dedicate this translation to them in the hope they might experience some of the joy Paustovsky's masterpiece has provided me.

—Douglas Smith

[1] Barnes's publication comprises only the first three volumes of Paustovsky's *Story*.

[2] See the thorough discussion in Munir Sendich, 'Problems of Literary Translations: Inaccuracies in Rendering from Russian – Joseph Barnes' Translation *The Story of a Life* of Konstantin Paustovsky's *Povest' o zhizni*', *Russian Language Journal/Russkii iazyk*, 25:91 (1971), 21–40. Similar complaints were made by Helen Muchnic in her review for the *New York Review of Books*, 'A Russian Soul', 20 Aug. 1968. Nevertheless, Barnes was awarded the PEN/ Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Prize in 1965.

[3] Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen*, translated by Constance Garnett, revised by Humphrey Higgins, abridged by Dwight Macdonald, introduction by Isaiah Berlin (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, translated by Thomas P. Whitney and Harry Willetts, abridged by Edward E. Ericson Jr (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

[4] Author's note, *Novyi mir*, 3 (1955), 3; Konstantin Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni* (Moscow: TERRA, 2017), 1:551–2.

[5] Paustovskii, *Povest' o zhizni*, 1:554.

GUIDE TO PLACE NAMES

Alma-Ata – Almaty, Kazakhstan

Bakhchisarai – Bakhchysarai, Ukraine
Baranovichi – Baranavichy, Belarus
Belaya Tserkov – Bila Tserkva, Ukraine
Belorussia – Belarus
Belovezha Forest – Białowieża Forest, Poland
Bobrinets – Bobrynets, Ukraine
Borshchagovka – Borshchahivka, Ukraine
Brest-Litovsk – Brest, Belarus

Chechelevka – Chechelivka, Ukraine
Chenstokhov – Częstochowa, Poland
Cherkassy – Cherkasy, Ukraine
Chernigov – Chernihiv, Ukraine
Chernobyl – Chornobyl, Ukraine
Constantinople – Istanbul, Turkey

Darnitsa – Darnytsya, Ukraine
Dembitsa – Dębica, Poland
Demievka – Demiyivka, Ukraine
Dorpat – Tartu, Estonia

Fastov – Fastiv, Ukraine

Glubochitsa – Hlubochytsia, Ukraine
Golta – Pervomaysk, Ukraine
Gorodishche – Horodyshche, Ukraine
Grodno – Hrodna, Belarus
Gulyaipole – Hulyaipole, Ukraine

Irpen – Irpin, Ukraine
Ivangorod – Dęblin, Poland

Kanev – Kaniv, Ukraine
Keltse – Kielce, Poland
Kharkov – Kharkiv, Ukraine
Khentsiny – Chęciny, Poland
Khristinovka – Khrystynivka, Ukraine
Kiev – Kyiv, Ukraine
Kishinëv – Chişinău, Moldova
Kobrin – Kobryn, Belarus
Kremenchug – Kremenchuk, Ukraine
Kreshchatik – Khreschatyk, Kyiv, Ukraine
Kuyalnik – Kuyalnyk, Ukraine

Lodz – Łódź, Poland
Loev – Loyeŭ, Belarus
Lipki – Lypky, Ukraine
Lugansk – Luhansk, Ukraine
Lvov – Lviv, Ukraine
Lyubartov – Lubartów, Poland

Melets – Mielec, Poland

Mirgorod – Myrhorod, Ukraine
Mogilëv – Mahilioŭ, Belarus
Molodechno – Maladzyechna, Belarus
Mukden – Shenyang, China

Nesvizh – Nyasvizh, Belarus

Odessa – Odesa, Ukraine

Peking – Beijing, China
Petrograd – St Petersburg, Russia
Pilipchi – Pylypcha, Ukraine
Pishchats – Pisczcac, Poland
Plevna – Pleven, Bulgaria
Pochaev – Pochayiv, Ukraine
Podol – Podil, Ukraine
Pomoshnaya – Pomichna, Ukraine
Port Arthur – Lüshunkou, China
Priluki – Pryluky, Ukraine
Pshemysl – Przemyśl, Poland

Rybnitsa – Rîbnița, Moldova

Sedltse – Siedlce, Poland
Siam – Thailand
Simbirsk – Ulyanovsk, Russia
Skarzhisko – Skarżysko-Kamienna, Poland
Smela – Smila, Ukraine
Solomenka – Solomyanka, Ukraine
Svyatoshino – Svyatoshyn, Ukraine

Tiflis – Tbilisi, Georgia
Trebizond – Trabzon, Turkey
Tripolie – Trypillya, Ukraine
Tsaritsyn – Volgograd, Russia
Tyasmin (river) – Tyasmyn, Ukraine

Uralsk – Oral, Kazakhstan

Vasilkov – Vasylkiv, Ukraine
Vepsh (river) – Wieprz, Poland
Vinnitsa – Vynnitsya, Ukraine
Vitebsk – Vitsebsk, Belarus
Voditsa – Vodytsya, Ukraine
Vyatka – Kirov, Russia
Vyshnitsa – Vyzhnytsia, Ukraine

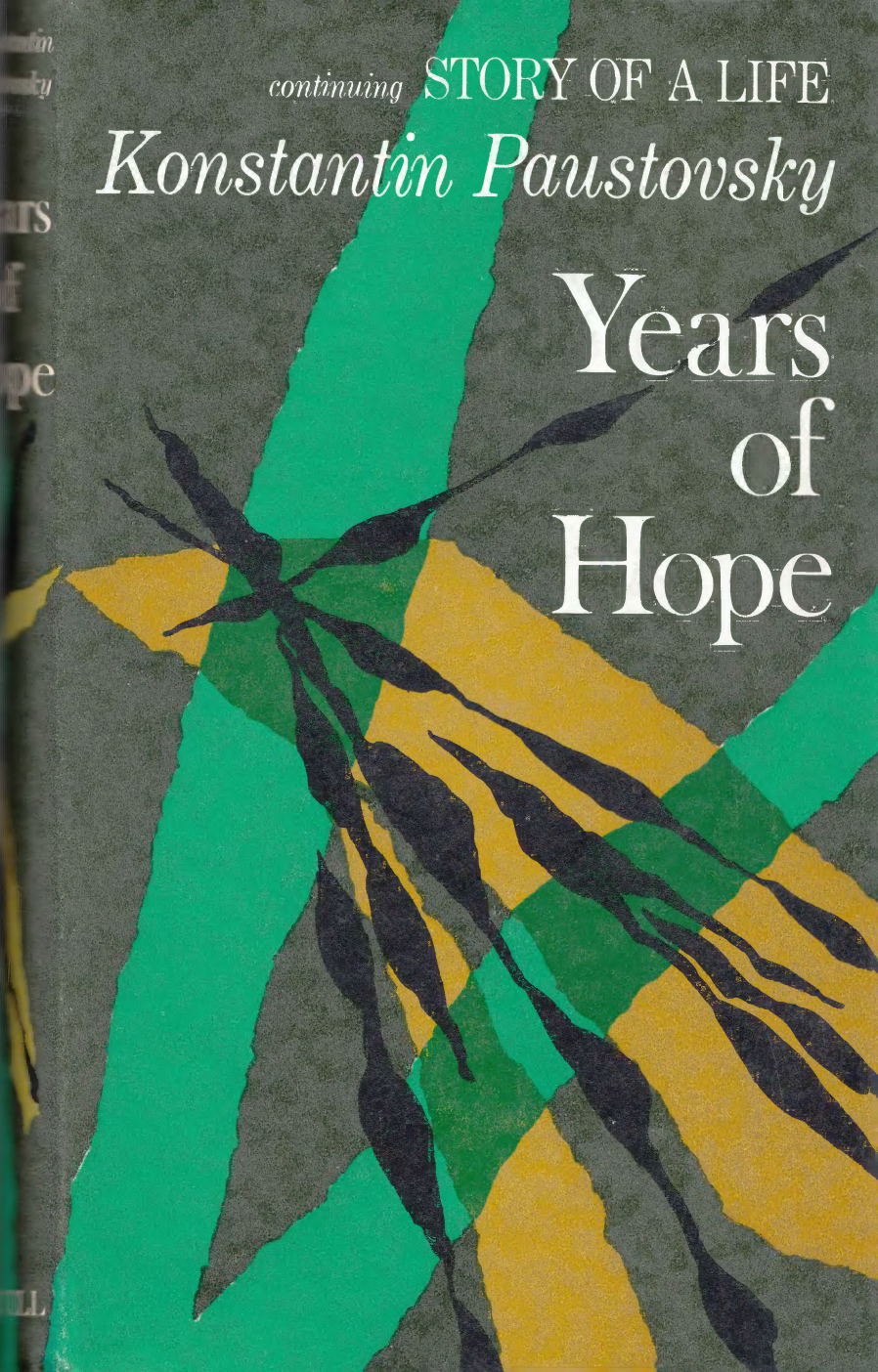
Yasinovataya – Yasynuvata, Ukraine
Yekaterinoslav – Dnipro, Ukraine
Yuzovka – Donetsk, Ukraine

Zamirie – Haradzeya, Belarus
Zhitomir – Zhytomyr, Ukraine
Zhmerinka – Zhmerynka, Ukraine
Zlatopol – Zlatopil, Ukraine
Znamenka – Znamyanka, Ukraine

continuing STORY OF A LIFE

Konstantin Paustovsky

Years of Hope



In the earlier volumes of his autobiography, Konstantin Paustovsky has written of his childhood and schooldays, of the war years and of the Revolution. In fact, because the Revolution made its way slowly over the whole vast area of Russia, he can be said to have lived through it three times: in 1917 in Moscow, in 1918 in Kiev and, as here described, in 1921 in Odessa—recently evacuated by the White Army and still under blockade.

Conditions were appalling. Water was selling at five hundred roubles a bucket, there was no electricity, the remaining sticks of furniture were highly coveted prizes for their fuel value, and those who could supplement their diet of a piece of bread and some carrots, by catching fish, were lucky. Paustovsky avoided death from starvation owing to the enterprise of an acquaintance who had the cheek to instal himself and a few chosen companions as the Information Service of a recently arrived government department, the head of which, when he discovered the trick, was so pleased with the work the team had done that he kept them on.

Next Paustovsky went to the editorial section of the *Seaman*, a periodical which was just about to start publication; it was sponsored by an enthusiast who had co-opted a number of good writers: it flourished for a time. Besides these 'good writers' and a number of young poets, Odessa in those days harboured a genius—Babel. Paustovsky came to know him intimately, and in several chapters gives an unforgettable picture of the great stylist who explained his method of work to him, and even showed him the twenty-two drafts which have resulted in the fifteen-page story *Lyubka*.

Thanks to his humanity and his intense powers of observation, Paustovsky is able to make these years of cruel hardship and vital intellectual life live again both in the stories he tells of the people he met, and in his account of his own experiences.

The Author

Konstantin Paustovsky, born 1893, went to school in Kiev and afterwards to Moscow University, as described in his *Story of a Life: Childhood and Schooldays*. When the First World War broke out he was not accepted for military service but worked in various capacities: in a field dressing station, in an armament factory and eventually as a journalist in Moscow. The volume in which he tells of these experiences, *Slow Approach of Thunder*, ends with the outbreak of the Revolution. During the succeeding turmoil, mistaken by the Bolsheviks for an Anarchist, he narrowly escaped being shot; later he made his way to Kiev, a battle centre of the Red Army, the White Army and the Ukrainian Nationalists; he had many adventures, which are described in *In That Dawn*. The present volume takes up the story from the time of his arrival in Odessa. In 1927 he gave up journalism to write the novels, short stories and essays which have gained for him a popularity which is unique among living Russian writers. In 1964 he visited England; today he is living with his wife and step-daughter partly in Tarusa, and partly in Moscow.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Story of a Life I: Childhood and Schooldays
Story of a Life II: Slow Approach of Thunder
Story of a Life III: In that Dawn

STORY OF A LIFE

* * * *

Years of Hope

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

translated by
Manya Harari
and Andrew Thomson

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I

Forerunners of Ostap Bender

In a piercing north wind, on a February day in 1920, the Whites fled from Odessa, firing a few parting shots at the town; the shells burst in the sky with a faint crump.

They left behind them a devastated city. The wind blew armfuls of half-burnt papers and greasy Denikin notes along the streets, piling them up against the drainpipes. The notes were worthless – they wouldn't have bought an olive. People simply threw them away. The shops shut down. Through the windows you could see swarms of ginger wharf-rats feverishly searching the dusty counters. The busy market squares had turned into deserts of cobblestone. Only the cats, unsteady with hunger, wandered about looking for scraps. But scraps in Odessa were a thing of the past.

Every last remnant of food had vanished. It was blood-chilling to think that all you could get in the whole enormous sea-port town was a little water tasting of rust. Miraculously, the pumps were still working and brought a trickle of it from the Dniester.

I had been living in Dr Landeman's disused sanatorium in Black Sea Street. Several journalists had moved in with me, among them Yasha Lifshitz, an extremely active reporter from Petrograd, who was interested in nothing but politics and his work. I spoke of him in the preceding volume of my autobiography, *In that Dawn.*

Shortly before the Soviet troops arrived, Yasha told me we ought to clear out, as the Bolsheviks were sure to nationalise the sanatorium and would turn us out anyway.

'We might get into serious trouble,' Yasha announced in a voice of doom.

He didn't say what kind of trouble, and as we were all expecting trouble all the time I didn't bother to ask him.

Yasha and I found a porter's lodge in the same street and rented it from the enterprising landlord, an unfrocked priest called Prosvirnyak.

The lodge stood in a neglected garden surrounded by high walls of rough stone, at the back of a two-storeyed building facing the street. In those unquiet days it was as peaceful there as in a fortress. Prosvirnyak himself had named the lodge 'Fort Monte Cristo'.

The previous tenant had been a Russianised German, Schwittau, a professor of political economy at the University of Novorossisk. He had converted the house into a comfortable villa, surrounded it with beds of marguerites and moved his library into it, but he soon felt a foreboding of danger and, forsaking all, fled to Constantinople.

The Professor's library consisted almost entirely of German books on economics, so tidy that they might never have been opened. Partly for this reason and partly too because of their Gothic script, I imagined them to be ineffably boring.

The books gave out a sharp smell of lysol and cloves. Ever since, these smells have been for me a sign of paralysing boredom, especially the smell of cloves; seeds of some tropical plant, they look like black carpet-tacks.

On the other hand, standing on the Professor's shelves were all eighty-six volumes of Brockhaus and Efron's Encyclopaedic Dictionary, and this was treasure indeed.

Living among his possessions, I formed a mental picture of the Professor. He was smug, well-washed, pink, with a reddish beard and gold-rimmed glasses, and his eyes had the watery gleam you often see in those of ageing bachelors. I disliked this image of my predecessor, so I kept the windows wide open, hoping that his staid ghost would be blown away.

Before describing the events that followed, I should say something about Black Sea Street. I grew very fond of this small suburban street and believed it to be the most picturesque in the world.

Even the way to it from town was a tonic against adversity, as I often experienced. I might be walking home, utterly dejected by some failure, but as soon as I found myself in the deserted alleyways around Black Sea Street – Observatory Lane, Sturzo Lane, Battery Lane – and heard the rustling of the old acacia trees, saw the ivy dark on walls gilded by the winter sun, felt the breath of the sea on my face, I at once recovered my peace of mind and lightness of heart.

These alleys all ran between garden walls; the houses hid at the back of the gardens, behind locked wicket-gates. The alleys led to Black Sea Street, and Black Sea Street stretched along the edge of the cliffs overhanging the sea – though 'stretched' is perhaps the wrong word: it was so short that you could walk from one end to the other of it in a few minutes.

The street was open to the sea, which was beautiful in all weather. On the left, you looked down on Langeron and Quarantine Harbour, where an old pier, worn smooth by the storms, curved out to sea. On the right, the steep rust-red cliffs, overgrown with pigsweed and goosefoot, led to Arcadia and the Fountains, towards the misty beaches on which the tides would often wash up floating mines, torn from their moorings.

Black Sea Street was the naval outpost of Odessa. All the steamers passed it on their way to and from the port. The rustling of its gardens told us the varying strength of the wind; we learned to gauge it by this sound as sailors do by the Beaufort Scale.

There were other, slighter sounds as well, that served as weather signs. The drumming of ripe chestnuts on the pavements meant that the wind was freshening and had reached gale force four.

Black Sea Street was always empty. Its few inhabitants preferred to stay indoors. The day the coalman passed with his horse and cart, we could hardly believe our eyes – firstly because charcoal was worth its weight in gold, and also because the coalman was

fearlessly advertising his status as a private trader by actually shouting in his rich and sombre voice the welcome words: 'Charcoal! Lovely charcoal!'

In those comfortless days, Black Sea Street seemed, however deceptively, an island of salvation for those who had been washed up on it by the storms of life.

Those were the days when Ilya Arnoldovich Ilf,[1] long before he became a writer, went about Odessa in a shabby cloak and with a step ladder, doing electrical repairs. His ladder over his shoulder, he looked like the tall, thin chimneysweep in Hans Anderson's fairytale.

Ilf was an electrician. He took his time over his repairs. Perched on his ladder, his pince-nez glinting, he kept a sharp eye on what was happening in the noisy flats and offices at his feet.

He evidently found much that was comic, for although he kept quiet about it, he was always chuckling to himself.

Dozens of Ostap Benders,[2] as yet undescribed and unrevealed, sauntered past him. They took little notice of him except for cracking an occasional joke about his 'intellectual' glasses and turned-up trousers. But they did occasionally offer him a little hydrochloric acid (of which the very existence had been long forgotten) for his soldering iron, or three yards of flex pinched from a synagogue.

Ilf would bargain long and furiously, with the sole object of hearing the latest Odessa jokes, sayings and swear-words. The fashion in them was always changing. It depended on a number of things – the position on the front in the Civil War, the presence or absence in Constantinople of the British Dreadnaught *Superb,* the behaviour of the Baltic sailors billeted on the miller, Weinstein. The latest expression, 'May I never get to where I'm going', plainly hinted at the danger of walking about the Odessa streets.

Ilf had soon to look for another job, for the power-station broke down – the Odessans thought, for good.

What has made me think of him and of his hero, the fearless racketeer Ostap Bender, is that even in those grim days racketeering flourished in Odessa. Even the most spineless caught the

infection. They, too, came to believe in the ancient law of the junk-market: 'If you want to eat, know how to sell the sleeves of a waistcoat.'

In time, the rackets infiltrated even our literary and journalistic milieu.

Neither Yasha nor I had a kopeck of Soviet money. We had enough salt fish for one day, and two stale rusks lying in the drawer of the desk. They gave out the same abominable smell of cloves and lysol as the Professor's books.

We knew we should do something if we were not to starve to death, but neither of us could think of anything. Anyway, what could you do in a half-ruined town in which there were as yet no offices, newspapers, markets, and indeed no Soviet money! You could only wait for things to settle down. Yet how could we wait when we were already faint and sick with hunger?

So we lay on our bunks, our threadbare coats over our heads, and all the same waited for something.

The lodge was like an ice-box. We stoked our *bourzhouika* stove[3] with newspapers and it quickly became red-hot. But it cooled down just as soon.

On the fifth day of the Soviet occupation of Odessa, we were visited by my old school friend from Kiev, Volodya Golovchiner. I had run into him a fortnight earlier in Deribasov Street where, in spite of his weak eyesight, gold-rimmed spectacles and seedy but lordly appearance, he was carrying on a brisk trade in cigarette lighters.

Volodya brought with him a little man, wrinkled as a monkey, who spoke very fast and as indistinctly as though his mouth were full of pebbles.

'This' – Volodya pointed vaguely in his direction – 'is Comrade Torelli, an Odessa reporter. Torelli is his pseudonym. "In the world," as your unfrocked landlord would say, his name is Blumkis. He has an idea.'

We poked our heads from under our coats and looked in silence at the owner of the idea, who was smiling guiltily.

'Torelli or Toricelli?' Yasha asked querulously. He was hard of hearing.

'Torelli,' Volodya said gloomily. 'But that's not the point. His idea has a bearing on our wretched circumstances. The said Comrade Torelli, Blumkis in the world, is in the same unenviable situation as the two of you and even I, Volodya Golovchiner, a champion swimmer and the son of a Kharkov professor of stomatology. He will explain his plan to you himself – in so far as his linguistic abilities will allow.'

Volodya was fond of talking in riddles. I remembered this from our schooldays.

Torelli rattled off something that sounded like a rapid roll on a bass drum.

'Allow me,' Volodya said impassively. 'I'll translate. Comrade Torelli believes that his idea should be adopted at once and, if possible, taken seriously.'

It turned out that Torelli was a lodger in Prosvirnyak's two-storeyed house, the one facing the street. He had heard from Prosvirnyak that we were 'metropolitan' journalists. Torelli envied metropolitan journalists, although nothing in the world would have induced him to leave Odessa even for a job on the *Russian Word*.[4] You may well ask why. The answer is simple. In Odessa you could always 'create' a sensation. You could write in the *Odessa Post*, for instance, that a meridian had exploded in the suburb of Perekop, and only the heroic efforts of the fire brigade had prevented loss of life among the working population. In Moscow or Petrograd, you could never get away with anything like that.

But this was not the point now, said Torelli. The point was how to survive. For this, at least four experienced journalists must combine their efforts. His idea entailed a certain risk, but if it succeeded we would have bread to eat the very next day, and perhaps even an advance of several 'lemons' each. Lemons were Soviet million rouble notes.

He refused to say what the idea was. We would have to trust him.

'It's unlucky to say too much in advance,' he told us firmly.

We were ready to believe anything. We were past caring. What was a risk more or less in our circumstances? We agreed to everything.

'Good,' said Torelli. 'Then I'll come for you tomorrow at eight.'

He put on his battered straw hat – until then he had been holding it behind his back – playfully said 'ta-ta!' and vanished.

'That's how it is,' Yasha said thoughtfully. 'All gone in the mighty storm. Everything sold for food.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Volodya.

'The fact that Comrade Torelli's boater is not the headgear for Odessa's winter winds.'

'He's got a sister, you know,' said Volodya. 'Last year she became paralysed, she can't walk. They live in one room. You can't imagine how devotedly he looks after her. Beneath that pitiful exterior beats a generous heart – a theme fit for Shakespeare!'

'What's he up to, your Torelli?' asked Yasha. 'He won't land us in some idiotic mess?'

Volodya said that everything was possible, and left us. We pulled our coats over our heads again. But for a long time I could not get warm and go to sleep.

I awoke at dawn when the air outside looked like muddy water tinted with aquamarine. Even to the eye, it was coarse-grained and laden with an icy wind. The wind was evidently blowing straight from the Pole. I thought disgustedly of having to get up and go out, and of how the wind would get inside my collar and numb my spine.

Why not stay at home? Curl up under my coat, gather all my warmth and, dozing off, extract from it, as from the cotton wool on a Christmas tree, a delicate, spun-glass dream, blue and gay and leaving behind it the same impression of tenderness as you get from kissing a sleeping child.

I waited for such a dream, but heard instead the angry hiss of the wind in the garden. Through it came after a while the sound of loud, insistent knocking – Torelli had arrived.

We walked to town through Alexander Park. The north wind lashed our faces with gravel and whipped up the gritty dust. The zinc-coloured sea rolled muddy waves, thundering out of the zinc-coloured morning mist. The persistent grating of the zinc vane on the roof of the small observatory in the park set one's teeth on edge.

'The spring will never come,' said Yasha. 'The sun will never shine. There will never again be anything. To think otherwise is the illusion of doomed intellectuals.'

Torelli gave a squeak and a cough. After a moment I realised that he was laughing. Reddish tears shone in his wind-beaten eyes.

'Where are you taking us?' Yasha asked him suspiciously. 'All this will end in a mess. I feel it in my bones.'

'Only to the nearest Soviet institution in Odessa, I swear it,' Torelli said hastily. 'There must be one that's opened by now. And you did say you were willing to take a risk.'

Volodya Golovchiner was waiting for us at the corner of Kanatny Street.

The town was empty. Horsemen with red ribbons on worn sheepskin hats clattered down the street, passing us without a glance. From every gateway, little boys popped out, and immediately, powerful maternal voices echoed through the yards:

'Back, you little pests. Come back at once!'

Shaking the windows, a lorry with a load of broken furniture rumbled slowly past. A soldier with a rifle sat in the back, smoking. The small boys reappeared in the gateways and disappeared as suddenly to renewed shrieks of, 'Come back, you bastards, may you burn in hell!'

The wonderful, stimulating smell of cheap tobacco drifted down the street. It made my mouth water.

'Keep up with that lorry,' Torelli whispered crossly. 'That's our chance.'

We quickened our pace. The lorry turned into Richelieu Street, towards the Opera House, and stopped in front of a dark grey building. It was one of the buildings left over from the time of Richelieu and De Ribas which gave Odessa the noble features of

Genoa, Florence and, according to some Odessans, of Paris itself.[5]

Piled up on the pavement, in front of the classical façade, were all the normal fittings of an average Soviet government department (this one, evidently, spent most of its time on the road): torn paper rolls, faded posters on calico wrapped round poles, rickety desks, dithering book-cases that fall on their faces at the slam of a door, portraits in grey frames, a dented boiler, and a mass of wooden boxes.

All this property was guarded by a sailor with a head of ginger hair so wiry that his cap seemed to float in the air above it.

Nailed to the door of the building was a piece of canvas with the inscription: 'Odessa Oprodkomgub'.

'This way, quick!' said Torelli. He dashed round the corner and reappeared in the small Palais-Royal Square beside the Opera House, where the sailor couldn't see us.

No longer the pitiful figure of the day before or even of the past hour, Torelli's face glowed with inspiration – I could not imagine why – and his eyes glinted craftily through the slits between his puffy eyelids.

'The first thing is to find out what Oprodkomgub stands for,' he said.

As it happened I knew that the abbreviation stood for 'Special Regional Rationing Committee'.

Torelli slapped his knees with his bony little hands and gave a stifled giggle.

'What could be better! It's exactly what we want!'

This was more than Volodya Golovchiner could stomach.

'Listen to me, Signor Torelli, either you tell us exactly what all this nonsense is about, or we leave you here and now and go home.'

It was then that Torelli told us his 'idea', his plan, and it struck us as both incredibly stupid and incredibly dangerous.

'You know what a government department is like,' he asked us, 'or don't you? You know that no self-respecting department can keep going without publishing an information leaflet or a bulletin of some sort about its work? Even the poorest has its information office. You do realise that? Right. But have you thought that to

have an information office it needs journalists? Especially reporters. And that unless he has such an office, the head of the department – be he Mr Ford himself – gets bogged down in his work like a chicken in a puddle? We'll start an information office for Oprodkomgub! We'll print a lovely report about the arrival in Odessa of three barrels of smoked fish from Ochakov and a wagon-load of maize and tomatoes from Tiraspol for immediate distribution to the citizens. And you know what this means for Odessa? It means that life will begin! – Life!' he shouted.

'And how can you be sure that they haven't got an information office?' asked Yasha. 'You take too much on yourself, Comrade Toricelli.'

'Ha! Ha-ha! Twenty times ha-ha! Can't you see they haven't even stowed their rubbish yet? They haven't started, they're infants! But suppose they do have an information office, well, they aren't the only department in Odessa. We'll go to another and start one there.'

Crushed by his logic, we could think of nothing to say.

'What it needs is a solid-looking character in spectacles who speaks Russian like the actor Kachalov,' said Torelli. 'You'll do very well, Comrade Golovchiner. You'll be the head of the section. You,' pointing at me, 'deputy; you, Comrade Lifshitz – treasurer, and I'll be the reporter. But what we have to do now is slip past that ginger Goliath of a sailor with his rifle. Come on, quick! The worst thing on this kind of job is to hang about.'

We assumed a business-like air and went up to the door of the enigmatic Oprodkomgub. Torelli followed, hiding behind our backs and whistling out of tune.

The sailor sat on a packing case, holding a small shaggy white dog by the front paws.

'Beg for uncle,' he was growling at it. 'Beg for uncle, you shaggy devil! You poor old toots, you! Come on, beg!'

The little dog wagged its tail and yelped, clearly unused to such flattering treatment. But it couldn't beg.

'Strayed out of the night,' the sailor told us. 'And now he won't go. Such a well-behaved little dog, you wouldn't believe it!

He's hungry, the brute. We'll have to put him on the strength, that's what we'll have to do,' he ruffled the dog's fur affectionately. 'We'll have to take him on, the wicked old thing. Fancy putting such a shaggy hound on a sailor's rations!'

The dog thrashed with its tail and howled with delight.

We slipped past the sailor, under the grim vaults of Oprodkomgub. I looked at my companions. They were smiling sheepishly.

'Quite a lad, that,' Yasha said unexpectedly.

'Who do you mean?' asked Torelli.

'Certainly not you.'

Tramping in heavy boots, soldiers were dragging office furniture along dark corridors. Cupboard doors flew open and crashed shut. The soldiers swore in muffled voices.

'Well, now,' said Volodya Golovchiner. 'We find out which of these rooms is the office of the head of the department, and we go and ask him to take us on.'

Torelli threw up his hands, stepped back and looked at him in horror and contempt.

'What are you talking about?' he hissed. 'Have you gone completely off your head? Or what? Are you a child? Do you want us sent straight to the Cheka[6] and liquidated? We walk in from the street and – bang! – we call on the department head! Who are we? What are we? Gutter journalists? The yellow press? You'll be the death of us. A lot of good I did, sweating out a brilliant plan for you to finish us all off! Is that how you go about things?'

'How, then?' We were all taken aback.

'If you don't know, then leave it to me,' Torelli said haughtily. 'I'll tell you what to do. No heads! We are the heads! Follow me.'

Bitterly regretting that we had ever got mixed up with him, we followed nervously.

Fortunately, no one took any notice of us and we eventually found ourselves in an empty, unswept corridor on the first floor. At the far end were the back-stairs and a lavatory, its door broken off its hinges.

'This looks all right,' said Torelli, pushing open the nearest door. It led into a room with nothing in it except vaccination forms lying on the floor, and a poster saying: 'Fight Swine Trachinosis!'

Torelli picked up the poster, laid it face-down on the windowsill and, taking a blue pencil from his pocket, wrote in an ornate hand: 'Information Section'. He thought a little and added in smaller script: 'Section Head Golovchiner V.L.'

We watched him, spellbound like rabbits by a rattle snake.

He reached into his trouser pocket for an envelope with a few tacks in it, went outside and pinned the poster to the door.

'That's that,' he said, rubbing his hands cheerfully. 'All according to plan. End of Act One. Now we await developments. Be seated, pray, on the windowsills.'

Volodya Golovchiner had a packet of Cuban tobacco, dry and black as peat. We sat down on the dusty windowsills, lit cigarettes and waited, talking in whispers – all except Torelli who whistled the waltz from the *Merry Widow*.

'Who knows,' Yasha said doubtfully. 'They might really shoot us, at that.'

Torelli snorted with contempt.

We sat and listened to the random sounds that gradually filled the building. There even came, like a summons from the underworld, the cracked tinkle of a telephone.

Through the window we could see the slope of Langeron. The wind was falling and the sea turning blue.

'We are impostors,' Yasha said gloomily. 'They'll see through us in no time. Why don't we go before it's too late?'

Torelli turned on him. 'I like that! Bravo! Encore! Don't make me laugh! Where's the imposture? Aren't we going to do an honest job of work? We are intellectuals and we are looking for a place where we can make ourselves useful. Isn't that just plain commonsense?'

'Torelli, you are a genius!' said Volodya. 'A Herbert Spencer, a Kant, a Poincaré! You have put my shaky status as future head of

the information section on a solid basis. Now I feel I'm growing wings!'

'Quiet!' Yasha suddenly said in an angry whisper, 'Stop fooling. Someone's coming.'

Indeed, from the corridor came the sound of footsteps and the clanking of spurs. The footsteps had the iron ring of the Commendatore's. The owner of the spurs stopped outside our door, coughed loudly, waited, and flung the door open. We shuddered.

Standing in the doorway was, all too obviously, a desperado in command of one of the famous partisan units. Shaggy thick grey eyebrows jutted out over his soot-black eyes. Blue shadows lay on his cheeks. A powerful Mauser with a wooden butt hung from his belt, and a map case was slung over his shoulder. The pockets of his field jacket bulged with cartridges, tobacco, flints and crumpled paper money. Crammed with all these things, both pockets had cracked at the seams and at each of his movements spilled handfuls of the precious tobacco.

The man with the Mauser looked us over carefully, then, glancing round the room and sizing it up, said in an unexpectedly high piping voice:

'Hullo to you. I am Karp Polikarpovich Karpenko. Former worker in the field of education, now your Commandant. Which of you is the head of this remarkable section? I understand his name is Golovchiner V. L. Is he here?'

'Yes, it's me,' Volodya cautiously replied.

'In that case,' said the Commandant, 'I humbly beg you to produce within the hour a detailed and signed list of all your requirements. And don't wait for other sections to get in first. The information section is always left in the lurch, as I know from long experience. And you know why? Because, dear Comrade Golovchiner, intellectuals dither and whine over every bit of rubbish. You have to show teeth and claws. Like that.' The Commandant showed us his hairy red fist, he even turned it this way and that so that we should see it better. 'As the saying goes, spin it round a hundred times and strike once. Then all the grunting stops and there's order. And there's this little thing as

well,' he tapped his Mauser, 'to clear the brain better than smelling salts. So, don't worry. I'll look after you, in as much as I've inherited a respect for worker intellectuals from my father. It's quite true, you know, what the poet says about sowing wisdom, goodness and eternal values. . . .'

He broke off and listened. Several men were groaning outside the door. He flung it open, dashed out and screamed in a tearful, old woman's voice:

'Are you crazy? What's this circus act? Can't you see it's the Information Section? What does it want with the fireproof safe that's meant for Accounts? Take it back. Down the back stairs to the ground floor. Shaking the whole building, you devils, cracking floorboards like china! Honest to God, it makes me sick just to look at you!'

There was puffing and panting outside the door, then a crash. Something fell, the window frame cracked, the glass flew tinkling, and the Commandant shouted desperately once again (as people usually shout when they clutch their heads):

'Hold it! Hold it, the devil, or you'll bring down the whole building! Hold it, I tell you. . . .'

It was then we felt the first tremor as of an earthquake. The building shuddered and swayed. Something thundered from the first to the ground floor. The attic shook overhead and ceiling plaster came down in a shower of white scales. Boots thudded outside, as people scattered.

The sound of the second shock merged with the Commandant's hoarse howl:

'Get off the landing, you bastards! Can't you see what's happening? Get off!'

The earthquake ceased as suddenly as it had begun. We went out into the corridor. Plaster dust hung like thick fog. The floor was furrowed as though a heavy plough had been at work on it. A corner was knocked off the window. At the foot of the back stairs lay the wretched steel safe, enmeshed in broken ropes and resting on its side after its leap from the first floor. The railing of the stairs, snapped clean off, hung miraculously by a rusty wire.

Around the safe, as around a corpse, the soldier-porters stood dejected, heads bowed. They were evidently a fatigue squadron and looked anything but soldierly.

Deep in thought, the Commandant also stood beside the safe. He saw us and kicked it with the toe of his boot. The spur jangled crossly.

'Seen the brute? A real killer! So you'll send me your list, Comrade Golovchiner. And don't be shy, ask for all you need.'

At that moment we became convinced that Torelli's 'brilliant' plan had succeeded, if not completely, at least in part.

We compiled the list and Torelli took it to the Commandant. He also had a friendly talk with him and learnt something of the way of life of Oprodkomgub. The Commandant was 'all right', Torelli told us.

We cheered up, especially when the first chairs and desks appeared in our room. Even Yasha brightened up. He stopped croaking, though he occasionally reminded us of the grim hour still to come, when we would have to fill in forms.

But our troubles were not over yet. Once more there were footsteps in the corridor, this time of several people. We quickly sat down at our desks, on which there wasn't yet so much as an inkwell.

Once again the door was flung open, and there came in a weedy young man in a coat altered from an army great-coat, a student's faded cap on his head. He peered at us shortsightedly through his thick spectacles.

This was Comrade Agin, former law student from Kharkov and now head of Oprodkomgub.

He was followed by his retinue – a bunch of hefty lads in tight tunics with creaky leather sword-belts.

It looked like the arrival of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius – a lofty-minded poet and philosopher – surrounded by legionaries clattering with armour and swords.

For a long time it was to seem to us incredible that this mild and sickly man could run the department responsible for Odessa's

food supplies, a rough and noisy place which was at once besieged by every shady dealer, thug and racketeer in town, all trying to breach its defences. But Agin, though quiet, was firm as a rock, and the seething crowds of red-faced speculators, on fire with dreams of fabulous profits, were stilled like waves at the door of his office.

'So we even have an information section!' Agin chewed his lips thoughtfully, and smiled.

My heart sank.

He looked at each of us in turn and grinned again.

'Who is the head of the section? You, Comrade? Glad to meet you. Your name? Golovchiner? No relation of the well known Zionist? No? Just as well. Even namesakes can be a nuisance. And these are your colleagues? All journalists? Very glad indeed. I hope we'll work in together, though at present the function of your section is not altogether clear to me.'

Torelli emitted a prolonged and indistinct sound, presumably to the effect that we would certainly work in.

Agin turned to him, his head slightly to one side, as though pondering this flood of eloquence and awaiting its continuation. But Torelli broke into a sweat and kept quiet.

'Yes, I see,' said Agin with a friendly smile. 'Of course, you are quite right.'

He asked Volodya to come to his office to attend a meeting of heads of sections, nodded to the rest of us, and left.

Volodya's face was white as a sheet.

He was away two hours – we were in agony – and came back, pink and jolly, said, 'Cheer up!' and handed us each a hundred thousand roubles, a bread card, and a form with a hundred and twenty questions to answer. But forms no longer frightened us. We showered congratulations and thanks on Torelli. Radiant as a conqueror, he kissed us thrice in the Moscow manner.

By the evening, the room really looked like a newspaper office. A small new rotary press stood on a table. On the wall above it hung an enormous poster of a green-helmeted Red soldier sticking his bayonet into the belly of a scaly dragon. A shaggy purple

flame came from the dragon's mouth. The caption read: 'Down with the hydra of counter-revolution!'

Over Volodya Golovchiner's desk hung a sheet of cardboard. On it were printed the portraits of the leaders, each in a small circle of oak-leaves. The faces were all, mysteriously, as alike as peas. The reason was that the watery ink had run and all the features had smudged into a blur.

The posters had been sent us as a sign of special favour by Karp Polikarpovich Karpenko.

Life was once more beautiful and the bread, warm from the temporary bakery next door, unusually tasty. Never before had I eaten such fragrant bread with such a crisp crust.

Everything had gone off splendidly, but all the same Yasha and I felt uneasy in our heart of hearts and one night, as he lay tossing on his bare bunk, he said to me:

'I don't know about you, but I've decided to go to Agin and make a clean breast of it about how we got into Oprodkomgub.'

'All right. We'll both go.'

Next morning we went. That day, for the first time, there were signs of spring. The sun was stronger, and white clouds, tumbling apart to reveal blue depths of sky, sailed over the sea.

You could feel the spring even in Agin's office. The damp floorboards steamed where patches of sunlight fell on them through the window.

Sitting back in his armchair, Agin heard us out politely, nodded, and laughed.

'I was expecting you,' he said, 'but to be honest, not quite so soon. I knew all about it. I can't say I was carried away by your manoeuvre; it bordered on criminal practice. Though, as it wasn't you who thought it up – it was that little man with the wrong Italian name – you haven't much to reproach yourselves with. Still, I wouldn't be much good as a department head if I hadn't realised there was something fishy.'

'How did you guess?' asked Yasha.

'There was no information section allowed for in the plan. It

appeared out of the blue. Karp Polikarpovich got suspicious at once. But he said you looked like educated people, certainly not crooks, probably good at your job, so it was a pity to sink you by having a row. I admit, though, it wasn't easy for me to include your improvised section retrospectively in the structure of the department. The oddest thing is that we do need such a section, as it turns out. We would be much worse off without it. So I am duly grateful.'

2

Plywood Maze

The old acacia trees in the boulevards flowered, and everything around them was strewn with yellowish blossoms.

In the thick of the acacias stood the Northern Hotel, to which Oprodkomgub moved in spring.

During the early revolutionary years, government departments showed an extraordinary restlessness. They were always on the move from one building to another, which they took over to the accompaniment of much noise, and immediately filled with flimsy plywood partitions and equally flimsy doors.

Set end to end, the partitions from any one department could easily have walled the city along the line of the Portofrank Circular Road.

Never quite reaching the ceiling, the partitions crossed at fanciful angles, cut stair-landings in half and formed dark, mysterious alleyways and dead-ends.

A vertical cross-section of the building from attic to basement would have revealed an astonishingly intricate human ant-hill inhabited by a unique species of human ant. They scribbled their way through mountains of paper by day and hid them for the night in the plywood cells with which the hill was honeycombed.

It was customary to plaster the partitions all over with orders, notices and wall-newspapers the size of bed-sheets.

A zinc tub for drinking water, with a tin mug attached by a chain, was set up in the plywood corridor; Aunt Motya or Aunt

Raya, the messenger woman, sat beside it; from that moment, the department became fully operational.

It sometimes even seemed that no department could possibly exist without its plywood partitions and its women messengers and that only in their presence could it begin to flourish – its life seething, and its work exhaustively commented upon by its own Aunt Motya and those of neighbouring, friendly or hostile establishments. Each Aunt Motya was the jealous guardian of the prestige of her own department. Its Office Regulations were her Tables of the Law; they were subject to no criticism and had clearly been entrusted by the Lord of Hosts himself to the Commandant upon the heights of the administrative Sinai.

There were many interesting things to be seen in the plywood maze, to begin with the Cashier's office – a gloomy little cell with a crooked little window cut in the partition.

Written on it in blue pencil were the words: 'Comrades! write the amount in words and don't trouble the cashier to cut the money. Cut yourselves! (*sic*) – Ref. Order 1807.'

The mysterious and rather frightening words, 'Cut yourselves', had a simple explanation: the cashier was handed the money in large sheets which he had to waste time cutting up into separate notes. Tired of this, he took to paying the wages in uncut sheets.

The sheets varied in value according to the denomination of the notes. Thousand-rouble notes, for instance, were printed twenty to a sheet, so the sheet was worth twenty thousand, while ten-rouble notes were in sets of sixties, so the sheet was worth six hundred.

But sometimes the cashier couldn't pay in whole sheets. He had to cut the right amount with a pair of scissors.

This he put up with – it didn't take long anyway. It was only when some arrogant member of the staff refused to accept whole sheets and insisted on being paid in ready-cut notes that a row broke out.

On such occasions, the peppery old cashier slammed his little window and shouted:

'Think your hands will drop off if you cut the money? If you

don't want to do it yourself, give it to the kids. Let them have a bit of fun.'

Slamming the window was a forbidden but powerful device of psychological warfare. I had experienced it myself and knew that, faced with a slammed cash-desk window, every employee panicked – especially those with many children, and alcoholics. Unaccountably, each felt sure that the window would never open again, that all the money had gone, that there was no money in the world and would never be again.

Even the most intractable claimant gave in and apologised. Then the cashier would open his window, give him a long, sad look over his spectacles and shake his head.

'Shame on you, young man. You're good at making rows, but a little thing like cutting the money yourself and saving trouble for the finance department – that's beyond you. Write the amount here, after the red asterisk.'

To enlighten the staff on currency matters, the cashier pasted up on the partition near the cash-desk a set of all the Soviet notes in circulation and, next to it, a set of those which were no longer valid.

The two sets made up a unique collection, and the only reason it wasn't stolen was that he had stuck it on with carpenter's glue so that it was impossible to strip off. Even so, the day after it was put up, Karpenko found evidence of an attempt on it: someone had started cutting the plywood with a fretsaw.

Most of the notes in those days had nicknames. Thousand-rouble notes were 'bits', millions were 'lemons', while a milliard bore the resounding name of 'lemonard'. The smaller denominations also had found unexpected names, the most endearing being kept for the small change of paper thirties and fifties.

Some of those no longer current were quite fantastic. There were the hundred roubles printed on the backs of playing cards, issued by some god-forsaken town in the Ukraine. There were Odessa notes with views of the stock exchange, there were White-Guard 'bells' and 'caps', Ukrainian 'silver roubles', hundred-rouble 'omlettes' and 'steps', and a host of other 'currency' backed

by the dubious assets of various towns, from Kryzhopol to Sosnitza and from Shpola to Glukhov.

The wall beside the cash desk was colourful. As soon as he was paid his money, nearly every employee went through the same drill: he pressed the sheets against the plywood, covered them with paper and rubbed hard to get rid of the sticky surplus of printer's ink.

By the end of pay day, every surface was tacky, and our hands, desks, papers and books were covered with serial numbers and signatures of the People's Commissar of Finance.

3
Barley Gruel

The hundreds and thousands of roubles we received as so-called wages all went for mid-day meals at the neighbouring public canteen. There, day in day out, we consumed a couple of spoonfuls of barley gruel flavoured with a green, vaseline-like substance. Torelli assured us it was rifle grease.

Apart from this, we fed on scorched bread and shell fish.

The bread had one remarkable property: the crust was quite separate from the loaf. They might have been two distinct geological strata. The space between them was filled with a cloudy, sour-tasting liquid, a kind of bitter bread-juice.

Some people liked it. They sucked the juice and said that it cured swellings of the joints.

The swellings were the result of malnutrition and cold. You couldn't touch them without feeling sharp and prolonged pain, and they burst open and bled every time you tried to wash your hands. In cold weather, they ached and when it was warm they itched unbearably.

I drank bread juice and can certify that it did nothing for my swollen joints, but it did give me acute pains in the stomach.

We boiled the shellfish with salt. They tasted strongly of fish glue.

We had to gather the shellfish ourselves at Langeron, prising them from the off-shore rocks with knives; of course we could do this only in calm, warm weather. So the shellfish were strictly summer fare.

We awaited summer impatiently. In summer I went fishing for goby-fish and *sultanka*. On the wide moles of the port, vegetable gardens, surrounded by fences made of rusty pipes and torn-up sheets of iron, were turning green. The leaves of the tomato plants gave off a wonderful smell, promising an early harvest of 'reddies' (as tomatoes were called in Odessa). The spectre of hunger faded for a while, but it was still there. It lay in wait for us, and we knew that at the slightest oversight on our part it would be back, and more menacing than before.

I felt I was the luckiest of men when I managed to get a few tablets of saccharine. It sweetened my beetroot tea, and as I drank it with a burnt crust of bread I felt new strength pouring into my veins.

All our money went on barley gruel and on water – a bucket cost 500 roubles. Not a penny was left, even for matches or firewood. Acacia wood the colour of sulphur was still on the market, but sold only in chips and by weight.

So we had to steal wood. I admit it without shame, if only because it was a dangerous business and the risk was sometimes deadly.

I need hardly say that we would much have preferred to feed our faithful *bourzhouika* on paper and newsprint. But old newspapers had to be stolen too.

Morally, there was little to choose between stealing papers and stealing logs, but in practice it made a great difference. Newsprint gave a fleeting hint of warmth and left the yard strewn with burnt paper and yellow ash, which brought upon us the admonitions of the unfrocked Prosvirnyak.

We stole wood mainly in Arcadia. It was the nearest residential suburb by the sea.

With the coming of summer, Arcadia made me think of the ruins of Roman villas – the Borghese, Aldobrandini or Conti. Dying ivy twined round the cracked pillars with their chipped plaster. The plaster was chipped off on purpose to make sure that the pillars were made of brick and could not be used as fuel.

Lizards sunned themselves in the glassless windows, where

golden broom flowered, clinging to broken stone windowsills. Swallows nested in the pilasters. Dusty thistles grew and multiplied in the loggias, as in enormous stone bowls.

Ants made Appian Ways on the marble slabs. Like the Coliseum with its crumbling south wall, the concrete pool had a crumbling rim on the side facing the south and the sea, while the bottom was overgrown with dry grass and immortelles.

These ruins were only about two years old but they already had an air of antiquity, and it overlaid the colours of deserted Arcadia with the dusty bronze patina of Ellas or Pergamon.

This was in summer. But in winter, when we went out at night and in bad weather, the ruins loomed ominously black. The January north wind howled in them and peppered us with small-shot of dry snow. Then it was impossible to imagine that the summer sun would one day rise over the ruins, and the softest of breezes whisper in the leaves of the surviving century-old trees.

That winter Yasha and I stole timber only three times, but we were very successful. Twice we brought back a floorboard each, and once we even got away with a door-frame.

The wood lasted us all through the winter, but only because Yasha had discovered a remarkable method of instantly bringing the *bourzhouika* to white heat and the kettle to the boil. The secret was to stoke it with splinters as thin as straw. This produced a violent though short-lived flame, and used up hardly any fuel.

I well remember our nocturnal forays for wood. First we went on a daylight reconnaissance in search of a villa where not all the timber had already been stolen. During the walk, Yasha would as usual conduct a passionate argument about the authorship of Shakespeare's plays or the economic consequences of the Treaty of Versailles.

After the reconnaissance came the main expedition. We set out before dark, following the shore where in winter it was unlikely that anyone would see us. Under our coats we carried a small hunter's axe and a brace, both belonging to Prosvirnyak. In return for this we gave him kindling for his samovar. The fire-

wood we shared only with Torelli. His invalid sister, bedridden and unable to move, needed constant warmth.

Near Arcadia, in a derelict cabin where in prehistoric times fruit-juice and soda water were sold, we waited for nightfall.

When it was dark, we made our way to the *dacha* we had selected. We went cautiously, stopping every few minutes to listen. At the slightest sound, we hid behind the nearest wall.

It was not policemen we were afraid of. There were none in Arcadia. Who would think of guarding ruins, gardens with bare branches whistling in the wind, or the bleak shore enveloped in the gloom of a stormy night? It was not the police we were avoiding but the petty thieves, the greedy pedlars who stole timber to sell it. The markets were swarming with them.

We bumped into them the very first night, and narrowly escaped being shot with a sawn-off rifle, while the abuse showered on us made our blood run cold.

Taking up the floorboards was the hardest part of the job. It was vital to make no sound, but the rusty nails invariably squeaked. We finished up with bleeding hands, torn nails and knees shaking with strain.

The boards were incredibly heavy, as though made of cast iron. With the greatest difficulty, exhausted and staggering, we carried them to the lodge. I stoked the *bourzhouika,* while Yasha collapsed on his bed – a worn mattress on the bare floor – cursing himself, the *bourzhouika*, Odessa, the Entente and the world at large and swearing that never again would he steal wood, no, not for anything.

I wasn't feeling too cheerful either. I felt we were on a slippery path and if we didn't look out would turn into common timber thieves. But the delights of hot tea were such that we there and then forgot our pitiful attacks of conscience. After tea, Yasha went to sleep, while I lay on the Professor's hard sofa and listened for a long time to the noises of the night.

4
Blockade

Memory plays many unaccountable tricks on us.

Our recollection of great events can be as hazy as that of a grey uneventful day.

I have tried to avoid this danger in my writing, but I am not sure of having been completely successful. The image we retain of a period can be subjective even though it seems to us objective and accurate. How otherwise account for the fact that, amidst all the resounding and amazing events of the time, our life in Odessa at the end of 1920 and in 1921 seems to me in retrospect a relatively peaceful interlude?

Odessa was deserted. Many workers had left with the first Red Army units – supply divisions and sailors' detachments – before the arrival of Denikin and the Interventionists.[7] Many other people had fled to the country, to escape hunger and mobilisation by the Whites.

The city had hardly any important industries. The largest were the jute and canning factories and the dry docks. The town was dominated by the port and its poor – dockhands, tramps and layabouts – while the stubborn and resourceful middle class had dug in on the outskirts of the city.

During the Intervention, the workers who had stayed in Odessa gave every assistance to the Bolshevik underground.

The Bolsheviks were in hiding in the quarries, right inside the town. In spite of arrests and shootings, their daring was such that, even during the joint French and Denikin occupation, they held a

regional Bolshevik conference, regularly published an underground paper, *Communist*, distributed leaflets, helped the printers and the telegraph and tramway workers who were on strike, blew up a train carrying supplies for the Interventionists, and ended by forming a war-revolutionary committee which provisionally took over the administration when the Soviet troops occupied Odessa.

Shortly before this, when already there was fighting in the suburbs, nine young underground Bolsheviks were caught by Denikin's counter-intelligence and shot after being horribly tortured. The account of these mediaeval tortures shook even the hardened population of Odessa.

I remember the stories about Ida Krasnoshchekina who bore the brunt of the fury of the Whites and showed unbelievable firmness and courage.

Before their death the prisoners wrote, in a letter to their free comrades: 'We are dying but we have triumphed.' These simple and moving words hold all the passion and boundless faith in victory which have become the hallmark of young revolutionaries.

By the end of Denikin's second occupation, there were even fewer workers left in the city. Nearly all the factories had shut down. The port was derelict. Life was at a standstill. Only black-marketeering raged like a bush fire.

In addition there was a wide rift in outlook between those who came from the north, and were living a third year of the revolution, and the Odessans for whom the revolution was only a few months old.

I, too, experienced not one but three October Revolutions – in 1917 in Moscow, in 1918 in Kiev and in 1920 in Odessa.

The revolution not only brought with it to Odessa the new political and social structure developed in the north, it also brought new men, trained by the revolution and alien to the mentality and practical experience of the average Odessan.

Resolute and ruthless men appeared (all referred to, indiscriminately, as 'Commissars') who knew exactly what to do to

ensure the triumph of the revolutionary outlook in the minds of the mixed southern population, impulsive and prone to anarchical acts.

One reason for the seeming quiet of our life was the blockade which lasted through the winter of 1920 and all through 1921. For months the sea lay flat and lifeless, without a trace of smoke from a ship's funnel. At the same time, blocked railways, blown-up bridges, bandit gangs and the 'wild lands'[8] which knew no law, cut Odessa off from the north.

All this accounts for the singularity of Odessa's way of life at that time.

I often woke up on the Professor's couch and listened to the night. This had become my favourite hobby.

The night gradually filled with silence. I listened to its approach, and the occasional faint sound of distant gunfire. It came from the French gunboat *La Scarpe* which regularly shelled Ochakov by night.

The heavy silence and the echoing shots were signs of the blockade. Until then I had only read the word in history books and in adventure stories as old as green oxide on bronze. Still, I had a fairly clear image of it.

'Blockade' meant an empty sea swept by fast patrol ships; naval guns trained on suburban vegetable gardens; extinct lighthouses; a blown-up transport ship showing the tip of its mast at the harbour entrance; a distant searchlight probing the milky way; and a feeling of lightness brought on by hunger.

If these were signs of blockade, the blockade of Odessa ran true to type. They all appeared in our daily life, though sometimes fantasy and reality were so mixed up that it was hard to tell one from the other.

In spite of hunger, the cold, damp lodge, the devastation and the loneliness (in spring Yasha went to live in town and I was left on my own) I was sometimes unaccountably filled with elation. I ascribed this to my youth; not that I was so young – I would soon be getting on for thirty – but I felt as though I were eighteen. I

was against everything adult, positive and sensible – against it, though sometimes also scared of it like a schoolboy.

I reacted in this childish way to everything in Odessa, even to the long spring and summer of the blockade.

'Blockade' meant an empty sea – and the sea was empty, and I liked it.

It was as empty as in the days before man had even learned to build a raft. You could watch it for weeks and months on end from the Boulevard, and never see anything except the sun flashing on the ripples.

Occasionally a squadron of strange ships appeared on the horizon, advancing haughtily under taut white sails, but as they drew nearer they turned into menacing, snow-covered mountains that suddenly thundered and flashed lightning at the darkened waves.

The sea responded to the voices of the clouds, turning a single clap of thunder into a multitude of reverberating peals that shook the watery expanse in all directions.

Every time I had a day off I went to the country, usually to the far end of Great Fountain.

Spring had come. In the steppe along the sea, it was more touching than in places rich in vegetation – perhaps because here you noticed every separate flower that struggled from under the rusty rails of the disused tramline, and every butterfly that fluttered, drying its wings, in a stream of warm sea air.

That warm air rose in steady, powerful exhalations from the foot of the steep red cliffs, from the beaches which the war had cluttered up with the wreckage of steamers and sailing boats. It seemed even to come from the hull of the minesweeper *Xanthe*. Wrecked off the shore of Great Fountain, she had wedged herself into the rocks and no one had so much as tried to re-float her.

Water gurgled, flowing in and out of her cabins and holds, and crabs climbed confidently up her sides, to warm themselves on the riveted metal plates of her deck.

And still the sea remained a desert, and I think we would not have been surprised to catch sight of coloured Phoenician sails or

of bronze prows of Greek triremes, long since vanished from the world.

The idea of ancient times goes with that of wilderness. There were, after all, very few people in the world in the days of the triremes, so the continents and seas were largely deserts.

But the reason why the Black Sea was a desert was partly the blockade, and partly that, when the Whites had fled from Odessa, they had taken with them the whole of the so-called merchant fleet – all the tugs, barges, cutters and passenger and cargo ships belonging to the Volunteer Navy, the Black Sea–Danube Company and the ROPIT (Russian Passenger and Cargo Line).

The fleet was taken to various Mediterranean ports where the White Command was selling it to foreign companies.

The Whites had taken privately owned ships as well, even the junk that had belonged to the notorious ship-owner Shay Kropotsky. Shay had been the laughing stock of all seafaring Odessa. His meanness and his double dealing were a legend. Not even a cab-driver would give him credit. Only down-and-outs agreed to serve on his ships, and they had literally to shake him for their pay – take him by the scruff of the neck and shake him.

Shay had owned the antediluvian paddle-steamer *Turgenev* which plied between Odessa and Ackerman and which Katayev[9] described in his *White Sail* – though some native Odessans dispute this and assert that the *Turgenev* belonged to the firm of Mishures and Sons.

Lost in the ships' graveyard among the rubbish dumps at the back of the oil port were a few old wrecks waiting to be broken up, among them rusted through and through, the *Dimitry*, which had also belonged to Shay. That ship was very nearly to cost me my life.

The harbour was as calm as a lagoon. Its proper function lost, it had become a breeding pool for bullheads and mackerel, and the favourite resort of aged fishermen.

Oats (from spilled grain) and sweet-smelling yellow camomile grew on the breakwaters. The mooring posts were so thick with rust that you could scarcely see the name of the manufacturers – Bellino-Fenderikh – engraved on the metal.

The harbour watchmen grew vegetables on the wide piers.

Of all the countless vegetable plots I have seen, these were the most attractive. Amidst the jungle of tomato plants each owner placed a packing case to serve as a seat. There you could sit and smoke and listen to conversation of every sort.

Every plot had its scarecrow to keep away the sparrows. They were made to look like tramps in sailors' vests and bell-bottoms made of sacking. A battered bowler hat or a child's quilted bonnet covered the rag-doll head. The bowler, set at a rakish angle, gave the scarecrow a shameless appearance, as though at any moment it might break into a *danse macabre* or a can-can.

The one that was most admired stood on watchman Dukonin's plot on Quarantine Pier. It represented a drunken skipper with a bottle of vodka in his hand and was known as 'Dukonin's George'. Instead of vodka the bottle was full of sea-water but the habitués of the port were none the less delighted with George and always gave a noisy welcome to his owner.

There were other anti-sparrow devices: little windmills with plywood sails that drummed on splinters of glass hanging on twine – this made a pleasant melodious tinkle which the sparrows could not abide; and coloured rags that fluttered from bamboo sticks, furling and unfurling in the wind.

All these things, including scarecrows in the port, were secondary signs of the blockade, which, for the time being, operated fairly peacefully (even the *La Scarpe* had moved away from the shore at the beginning of summer) and therefore encouraged the Odessans' peaceful and even idyllic pursuits.

The Polish war[10] hadn't reached Odessa. All was quiet. Only rarely did the roar of gunfire come from the sea, always from the side of Ochakov and the Kinburn Spit. This happened when Vrangel's cruiser, *Kagul*, came from the Crimea and shelled the coast at random. Our shore batteries drove it off and it turned readily back with an air of mission accomplished – belching smoke, rolling mountains of shining spray, and flying a faded St Andrew's flag from its gaff.

Another sign of the blockade was the fact that a tiny piece of

hard maize-bread and ten apricots were considered a sufficient diet.

Working at Oprodkomgub, we knew the superhuman effort needed to supply the town at all; it was like feeding its thousands on the five loaves of the Gospel parable.

Bread was issued against ration cards – or, as they were called, 'by letters'. The cards were marked with all the letters of the alphabet from A to Z, each denoting the category to which the consumer belonged. The As got most, the Zs about enough to feed a canary. I belonged to category K.

I liked standing in the long queues. The life of a queue, though brief, was interesting. It lived on fantastic rumours, anecdotes, sudden panics, arguments and jokes about some bit of worldly wisdom someone had dropped, and of course on rows. The rows blew up as suddenly as rockets, but took a long time to die down, like dust after an explosion.

Fights were rare and took the harmless form of people pushing each other in the chest with the flat of the hand.

Once I witnessed a scene of which the verbal economy and effective pantomime deeply impressed me.

Standing in the queue was a short, old, Jewish gentleman in a dusty bowler and a worn black coat reaching to his ankles. Smiling and nodding benevolently, he observed the queue through unusually thick spectacles. Now and then he took out of his pocket a small black book with the Star of David embroidered in gold on the cover, read a page or two and returned the book to his pocket.

He must surely be a scholar, I thought, perhaps even a *tsaddic*,[11] an old philosopher from Portofrank Street, his tranquil spirit unshaken, his kindliness unchilled and the smile in his blue, child-like eyes undimmed by the misfortunes of a lifetime.

Watching the queue from the side was a young man with an impudent air, a black skull-cap, and down-at-heel but shiny, canary-coloured shoes.

Leather shoes were a great rarity. People went about in clogs. The town echoed to their drumming. In the morning, when

everyone was hurrying to work, if you shut your eyes you could imagine that the entire population of Odessa was dancing to castanets. So the queue watched the impudent young man's canary-coloured shoes with deep envy and admiring looks and sighs.

The young man was wondering how to jump the queue without causing a fuss and a row. He saw the old gentleman with the book, and naturally took him for the very embodiment of mildness and non-resistance to evil. Making up his mind, he skilfully inserted his shoulder between him and his neighbour in the queue and, pushing the old man, muttered casually:

'Excuse me.'

Still with the same smile, the old man bent his sharp little elbow, drew it back, took aim and, dealing the young man a swift and forceful blow in the chest, right under the heart, said politely:

'Not at all. Excuse *me*.'

The young man grunted and flew back, hitting an acacia tree. His cap fell off his head. He picked it up and walked away without looking back. Only at the corner did he turn and shake his fist at the old man, whimpering

'Jailbird! Bandit!'

The queue was silent – its collective thought had not had time to crystallise and find expression – while the old man took his book out of his pocket and immersed himself in it, evidently searching for some kernel of truth which he would later discuss with his cronies in the quiet of Portofrank Street.

If the weeks and months of the blockade could seem peaceful and untroubled to a part of the population, this was only because it knew nothing of what was happening outside the town. In reality, the situation was grim and the new administration had need of all its resourcefulness and self-reliance to cope with the danger to the city.

After the flight of Denikin's main army, a force of some seventy thousand of his officers and men had been left behind and were concentrated in the various German settlements – Liebenthal, Lustdorf, Marienthal – on the outskirts of the town.

The Allies relied on them to promote an uprising in Odessa, which they on their side would then support with artillery fire from their ships.

Apart from this, there were, at a conservative estimate, some two thousand bandits, burglars, thieves, forgers, fences and other shady characters living in the suburbs of Moldavanka, Bugayevka, Slobodka-Romanovka and Inner and Outer Mills.

Their mood was uncertain. As a general rule, bandits tend to be hysterical and unstable in their attachments. No one could tell what they would do if there were an uprising.

There were very few Soviet troops in Odessa. Meanwhile an Allied squadron was already cruising offshore, having sent the Italian mine sweeper *Raccia* ahead on reconnaissance.

But an event took place which sharply changed the situation. The *Raccia* struck a mine when it was beam-on to the Great Fountain lighthouse. All we heard of it in town was the faint echo of an explosion at sea, which alarmed no one.

By order of the Provincial Committee, fishermen from Golden Shore, Great Fountain, the Kovalevsky estate and Lustdorf – all experienced and level headed men – went out in their barges, picked up the survivors and the bodies of the dead, and brought them ashore before the squadron had had time to reach the scene of the shipwreck.

The bodies of the dead were taken to Odessa, and a signal was sent to the Commander of the squadron. It informed him that the city was grieved by the disaster and wished to assume the burden of a solemn funeral for the gallant victims, and it invited him to attend the ceremony and to send sailors' units to form a guard of honour.

The admiral agreed – there was not much else he could do.

Next morning, unarmed Soviet soldiers and sailors formed up all along the way from the port to Kulikov Field where a common grave had been dug. Mourning flags hung on all the houses, and the way was strewn with flowers and branches of thuya.

A hundred thousand Odessans – almost the entire population at that time – attended the funeral.

Dock workers carried the coffins. After them came sunburnt Italian sailors, rifles pointing down.

The bands of the foreign ships played, as well as the combined Odessa band. Ours did not disgrace itself, and the heart-rending strains of Chopin's Funeral March made the sensitive Odessan women wipe away their tears with their shawls.

The bells tolled mournfully from New Athos Church. The roofs were black with watching crowds.

Speeches were made at the grave. The Italians listened and presented arms. Then the distant sound of a salvo at sea mingled with that of a volley of rifle-shots on Kulikov Field. A pyramid of flowers rose over the grave.

After the funeral the foreign sailors were given supper at the former Frankoni café. Comrade Agin dipped into the sacred food reserve for the occasion, and used up most of it.

After such a funeral, how could there be any question of bombardment or of uprising? The sailors of the foreign ships would not have stood for it. They were grateful for the honour paid their fallen comrades and for the warmth of their own reception.

The old admiral (who looked like Giuseppe Verdi) decided that the game was up and ordered the squadron back to Constantinople. It vanished into the gloom of the evening, leaving Denikin's officers to their fate.

By allowing armed foreign sailors into the town, the Provincial Committee had taken a huge risk, but it was an honourable one, and the funeral proved a bloodless victory over the Interventionists.

Soon afterwards, the blockade was lifted, and the first barge-loads of apricots sailed into the port from Kherson.

Then, on a cloudless morning, two Turkish feluccas from Skutari, colourful as a picture, tied in at the Quarantine Pier – they were the first cargo ships to reach Odessa.

Next day the papers announced triumphantly that two feluccas had arrived from Turkey with a kilo of flints for cigarette lighters, glass beads, gilt bracelets, and a small barrel of olives.

What mattered, of course, was not the kilo of flints, but the fact

that the sea was free again. This seemed to me suddenly to alter its appearance: gay under a gusty wind, it shone with such snow-white spray as I had never seen on it before.

Any day now, we would see, in the blue distance to the south-west, the mighty hulls and yellow funnels and strange flags of ocean-going craft, and would hear whistles and rumbling anchor-chains – a sound which promised those who sailed the seas a well-earned rest in a beautiful though foreign land.

5
Concatenation of Circumstances

Volodya Golovchiner was fond of reflecting on the 'cunning and unpredictable concatenations of circumstances' which rule our fate. He quoted Chekhov's *Ivanov* to prove it: 'We, human beings, live like the flowers of the field. Along comes a goat and – snip! there's no flower.'

Torelli agreed, adding that, whatever might be true in the world at large, you could never be sure of anything in Odessa. Odessa was a law unto itself. Anything might happen, even a full-scale battle over a set of kitchen chairs, as had been the case during the Intervention in 1919.

The Interventionists had divided the city into four zones – French, Greek, Petlyura's and Denikin's, each fenced off by a row of bent-wood chairs. One day, when the French sentry had left his post on urgent business, Petlyura's men pinched some of them, thereby annexing a large slice of foreign territory. When he came back the indignant sentry 'started a commotion' and began to shoot.

However this may be, the following incident proved Volodya's point: the cause was indeed a complicated and unpredictable combination (or 'concatenation,' as he insisted) of circumstances.

Early one morning in summer, when the blockade was at its height and Odessa's total isolation induced a certain recklessness in her mood, Torelli hammered on our door and shouted:

'Get up! There seems to be a new Intervention.'

I leapt out of bed. In Odessa you had to be prepared for anything. From the top of the cliffs overlooking Langeron and the

port veiled in its delicate faint-blue mist, we saw what Torelli described as rosy-fingered Aurora (drifts of cloud over the sea, lit by a quiet dawn) and, on the clear waters of the harbour, two enormous, clumsy, ocean-going liners flying the French flag.

The French mine sweeper *Lieutenant Borri,* long and elegant as a fine cigar, lay beside them, a wisp of smoke over her funnel and the brasswork on her deck dazzling as the sun.

We rushed down to the port, but were not allowed in. It was cordoned off by units of sailors and Red Army men.

The two French transport ships were slowly moving towards their berths. We heard that the commander of the minesweeper was the well-known French writer Claude Farrère, author of *Opium Dreams.*

This was sufficiently interesting in itself. Still more interesting was the disembarkation which followed.

Calmly walking down the gangways of the troopship were not Zouaves, not coffee-coloured Senegalese, not even men of the Foreign Legion, but Russian soldiers, unarmed and in brand new khaki uniforms, indistinguishable from those of the old Tsarist army except for the addition of squeaky polished leggings of brown leather.

The men formed up on the quay and were marched off to barracks by Soviet commanders.

An hour later we knew all about it. 'All' was the fact that, during the War, Nicolas II had sent an infantry corps, known as the Russian Expeditionary Force, to France. It sailed from Vladivostock, landed in Marseilles and marched through Paris under the eyes of delighted Frenchwomen who showered the men with flowers.

President Poincaré took the parade at the Arc de Triomphe, where they marched past to the rousing strains of *'Chubariki-chubchiki,* trouble isn't grief.'

The French Command was not so keen to share the fruits of victory with Russian bears as to hurry them off to the front; all the same about five thousand of our men were killed in battles with the Germans on French soil.

Then came the revolution and the Russians refused to continue to fight. They were sent to the rear and interned in prisoner-of-war camps. There they remained for several years, although they kept demanding repatriation and even mutinied from time to time, causing considerable trouble to the French authorities.

In the end, the French decided to get rid of them, put them on troopships and, by agreement with our government, sent them under convoy to Odessa.

All Odessa flocked to the port to welcome the Russian soldiers. They were hugged, kissed and presented with flowers.

Then a mysterious incident occurred.

The disembarkation over, the ships left their moorings and were sailing past the Vorontsov lighthouse into the roadstead when, from our Black Sea Street, a volley thundered, and shells exploded across their bows.

The two transport ships stopped their engines while the minesweeper turned broadside-on to the port, and a dazzling violet light flashed on and off from its conning tower, signalling Odessa.

Meanwhile guns were being mounted on the Promenade. Sailors with Mausers at their belts worked in grim and concentrated silence.

All Odessa learned that, hidden in their holds, the troopships carried a large cargo of arms and even some light tanks.

The French had meant to kill two birds with one stone: rid themselves of the Russian revolutionaries, then call on the Crimea on their way to Constantinople and unload the arms for Vrangel.[12]

The Odessa authorities had found this out from the men of the Expeditionary Force and asked Moscow by radio for instructions.

The order came to detain the ships and demand that the arms be landed in Odessa.

The French refused. It was said in Odessa that the whole dirty business had been thought up by General d'Anselme; even the Whites, his allies, thought him stupid as a donkey and as mean as Plyushhkin.[13]

Two days passed. All Odessa crowded on to the beaches,

waiting to see what would happen. The French were adamant and kept up steam; their funnels never stopped puffing.

They were evidently looking for some dignified way out, but finally could think of nothing better than brute force.

A strong squadron of French warships was despatched from Constantinople. Its commander signalled grimly that he would shell the coast and raze Odessa to the ground unless the ships were released.

I still remember our bitter disappointment when, to save Odessa, Moscow advised the release of the ships. We were not strong enough at sea then to take on a whole French squadron.

The day the ships left, I went to Fountain where the cliffs looked out on to the open sea. A thick pall of smoke shrouded the horizon. The French squadron was approaching. It stopped a few miles away and waited for its troopships.

The troopships were sailing full steam ahead. Swooping after them and darting from ship to ship came the minesweeper *Lieutenant Borri*. The sight must have been too much for one of our shore batteries which fired a useless salvo in their wake.

I felt cruelly hurt for France and for the French, hurt for the whole of their great culture, for Diderot and Voltaire, Hugo and Stendhal, for Zola and Corot, for Pasteur and Delacroix, for all the great Frenchmen whom none of us distinguished from Russians. They were as close to us as Pushkin, Tolstoy and Chekhov. They would have felt bitterly ashamed of France's political confidence-tricksters and their representative, General d'Anselme. I could imagine how coldly and contemptuously Hugo or Stendhal would have had the General shot for cowardice and knavery.

6

Day of Peaceful Uprising

We had been without electricity for so long that we were beginning to forget it had ever existed. Bulbs were black with dirt, and if you turned a switch by mistake it squeaked with rust.

Only Volodya was delighted. With the air of making a discovery, he announced: 'Every epoch has its distinctive style. Ours is that of a new pastoral age. Think of it – no electricity. Nettles growing on the tramlines. Potatoes flowering in the squares. We wear Greek buskins on our feet and drink fresh water instead of vodka. What could be nicer? It's the dawn of the golden age.'

One day I wasn't feeling well and stayed in bed instead of going to Oprodkomgub. It was late in spring. The chestnuts were in flower and in the evening a mist-wrapped moon rose over the sea.

I lit the oil lamp and was quietly reading the tenth volume of Brockhaus and Efron's Encyclopaedia when something strange and disturbing happened – the filament in the bulb of the ceiling lamp turned yellow and began to glow, though without reaching anything like a state of full incandescence. The room filled with an unpleasant, pallid light that made it look like a morgue.

I watched, hypnotised, wondering why the light was so dim. Obviously the feeble current was dragging itself along rusty wires, struggling with ancient connections and dusty knots of insulating tape and getting stuck in the meters choked with cobwebs.

Just as I thought the light was growing brighter, it faded almost to vanishing point. All the same, there was enough of it to light up the oak book-cases and sombre rows of books.

It struck me that there was something sinister about the light suddenly coming on. It was an omen, a warning. I was not alone in this. Odessa secretly panicked. The light meant trouble. What kind of trouble?

Torelli gave me a hint. He knocked and came in, pale, wild eyed, a woman's brand-new coat with a monkey collar over his arm.

'Could I possibly ask you to hang it up in your cupboard?' he asked hurriedly. 'Just for a few days. It's my sister's.'

I was taken aback but I took the coat and hung it up. It was a light spring coat and smelt faintly of scent. Clearly, Torelli's sister Rachel, still a pretty girl with freckles on her face, had never once worn it since her illness.

'What's the matter?' I asked Torelli.

'It's a matter of logic.' He gave an artificial laugh and rubbed his hands. 'You know as well as I do that the power station has enough coal-dust for three nights. Yet they've started it up. That means that before the three nights are out, something is going to happen. Something that requires electric light.'

'But what could happen?'

'How do I know?' He shrugged. 'St Bartholomew's Night? Massacre of the Innocents? Rape of the Sabines? The last days of Pompeii? You can take your choice. Good night.'

He went, leaving me to rack my brains.

I couldn't think of anything, so I went back to bed. I tried to switch out the light – the switch squeaked but the light stayed on. I waggled the switch up and down. It squeaked loud and angrily but the light didn't even blink. I climbed up on a chair and tried to unscrew the bulb, but it had soldered itself to the socket.

I got into bed, leaving the windows open. The drowsy, rhythmic sound of the waves lulled me to sleep.

I awoke at dawn. Dew was gathering on the branches of the thuya outside my window. The garden was deserted and still. But in the near corner, where an old barrel of lime had always stood, there was a large, dark, shapeless object, rather like a hayrick.

I looked hard at it. Somehow it was frightening. Pulling myself

together, I climbed through the window into the garden and went up to it. It was a heap of old but expensive coats. There was skunk with a beaver collar, a woman's astrakhan coat, two old-fashioned black spring coats and an astrakhan jacket.

Underneath the layers of fur I found a low stool, upholstered in damask, with curly gilt legs. I had seen one like it on the stage, under the feet of the old Countess in *The Queen of Spades*.

I pulled it out and tried to lift it to have a closer look, but soon gave up – it seemed to be filled with lead.

I kicked it and heard something tinkle inside, under the elegant Louis XIV upholstery. The mystery deepened. I meant to solve it, but I first ran out to the nearest shop to buy bread. The shop stayed open only two hours – I was afraid of being late.

Coming back, I found that the pile in the corner of the garden had been camouflaged with straw and fallen leaves, so neatly that no one would have guessed there was anything there.

I dislike mysteries. Knowing that Prosvirnyak had the key of the door from the yard into the garden, I went to ask him what was going on.

Prosvirnyak was our political barometer. If he looked away when he met us, pretended not to hear, interrupted us by shouting at his cook, a former nun, 'Don't put too much oil in, Neonilla,' it meant that the regime in Odessa had suffered a setback, however slight.

But if he went out of his way to be amiable, laughing an affected, deep laugh and stroking his beard with both hands, we knew that the regime stood firm.

That day he was polite but livid.

'You of all people,' he said with quiet emphasis, 'as a civil servant with however limited a responsibility for the actions of your masters, should know that a Day of Peaceful Uprising has been proclaimed in Odessa. According to the authorities, the Day is to last three days.'

'I haven't heard,' I said. 'I haven't been to town yet. What is this Peaceful Uprising?'

He spread a grey sheet of paper in front of me. His hands were

shaking. 'I tore this down with my own hands from the wall of my own house at eleven o'clock last night.'

I read the order signed by the Odessa Provincial Committee. It said that, as a means of expropriating the possessing classes, whose wealth was now the property of the people, a Day of Peaceful Uprising was proclaimed. All citizens without exception were to hand over their surplus food and belongings, and keep only the listed essentials.

I read the list. It said: 'To be left for the citizen's private use, one suit of outer clothing, one set of underwear, one pair of shoes (not boots), one headgear,' and so on down to 'one fork, knife, soup-spoon, mug, cooking utensils (only those essential), and one hundred grams of sugar.

'In the event of gold, valuables, foreign currency, or luxury or black-market goods being found, those who concealed them will be brought to trial for treason and counter-revolution.'

'Swine,' said Prosvirnyak, making me start. I had never before heard a coarse word from his honeyed lips.

'And now,' I said, 'will you kindly remove your stuff from under my windows and hide it elsewhere. As you may appreciate, I don't want to be shot because of your moth-eaten coats and your foot-stools stuffed with gold.'

'You are very much mistaken,' he said gently, pressing his hand to his breast. 'You have no reason to be angry. Two of the coats are mine, but the footstool belongs to General Rennenkampf's sister-in-law. I couldn't refuse, especially as she had seen me hiding my own stuff. Put yourself in my shoes. I'll take it all away as soon as it's dark.'

'Right,' I agreed. 'But mind, not later than tonight.'

Forgetting, apparently, that he was unfrocked, Prosvirnyak raised his arms to heaven and proclaimed in an affectedly inspired voice, as though from a pulpit (while his eyes flashed angrily): 'These are evil times indeed! Truly there are no bounds to human wickedness and the wiles of Satan.'

Dropping his arms, he went on in his ordinary voice:

'You I respect, but that Comrade Gavarsaki – the electrician, the

tenant in Flat 3 – he worries me terribly. He's buying up explosives. One of these days, they'll pick him up and us as well and shoot the lot of us. I'll stake my life on it. Beware of him. Be careful he doesn't bury his infernal fireworks in the garden. The coats are nothing. At the worst, the "comrades" will take them. I'm prepared for anything.'

I went away convinced that he had not the slightest intention of removing his belongings, and indeed, when I came back with Yasha from the office, the pile had stretched from one end of the garden wall to the other. All the things were covered up with straw as carefully as the first lot which, by comparison, seemed to me quite small.

Dozing on a kitchen chair beside them was an imposing old gentleman with white side-whiskers. There was such a period air about him that you might have thought a story by Goncharov or Ostrovsky was being filmed in the garden.

'You haven't moved your things, of course,' I said to Prosvirnyak. 'But be that between you and your conscience. Who is the character in the garden?'

'The watchman,' he said mysteriously. 'Between ourselves, people have brought their things from all over Black Sea Street – it's such a secluded place here. They're afraid of two things, naturally. On the one hand, the authorities may come and take everything, and on the other there are the bandits – you never know when they will strike. So we decided to keep watch in turn. Comrade Gavarsaki tried to get in with his fireworks, but I didn't let him.'

'What fireworks?'

'A liquid of some sort. In two-gallon carboys. He's a fool that Gavarsaki.'

'Hm . . . yes,' said Yasha, having learned what was going on in the house and garden. 'It's going to end in a God-awful mess, I can tell you here and now.'

Going to the office that morning, I had been struck by the unusual amount of traffic in town – especially the number of prams, push-carts and anything on wheels suitable for the transport of

small objects; there were even bicycles loaded like mules and low wooden platforms on castors. The prams were mostly ramshackle and held together with string.

All this stream of baby carriages rolled towards the Greek market; so did the briskly rattling hand-carts pushed from behind. People were hurrying in the same direction, panting under the weight of parcels and suitcases, or dragging lamps and sewing machines, tailor's dummies and dentists' chairs.

This great migration was taking place in complete silence. Even the children in the prams uttered no sound. Not a squeak nor a howl – well wrapped up and sheltered by curtains and hoods, they were all fast asleep. And they must all have been future giants, judging by the way the prams sagged under their weight.

This went on all day. The staff of Oprodkomgub watched from the windows. The slightest hold-up in the traffic made the watchers uneasy. Leaning out, they called in worried voices:

'What's the matter? Won't they let you through? Try Perekop. They'll leave that to the last.'

'No, they're not stopping us,' the people in the street called back reluctantly. 'It's just a pram that's broken down. It's holding us all up.'

'What's in it?' The watchers asked with lively interest.

'Tins of halva! About two hundred pounds of it. A whole consignment.'

Torelli explained it all to me the moment I got to the office. The night before, the search parties had gone through the Greek market district, expropriating superfluous wealth. So now, people from other parts of the town – the Station district, for instance, where the expropriation was still to come – were moving their valuables to the Greek market for safety. If, by next day, the Station district had had its turn, prams and people would flow back, making room for those from French Boulevard.

Yasha and I couldn't sleep all night. The owners of the property hidden in the garden kept flitting about like bats, vanishing at the slightest sound as though the earth had swallowed them up.

We also stayed awake waiting for a search party to arrive at any moment – no one knew when it would be the turn of our street.

So we listened to all the strange sounds which came from outside and, to pass the time, tried to identify them.

The rustling in the main building was made up of the anxious whispers of the tenants in all the flats. Rising above it, could be heard the nagging, whining voice of Comrade Gavarsaki who had still not managed to dispose of his carboys of unidentified liquid explosive.

'It's all very well laughing,' said Yasha. 'If I were you I'd take that damned footstool out and get rid of it. Throw it over the wall into the next yard. Don't you realise you're risking your neck? How are you going to prove it's not yours?'

'All right,' I said. 'You go and do it. And you deal with that mob of owners. I don't care by now.'

Yasha snorted.

'Hi, you!' he suddenly shouted through the window at a thick shadow, which immediately disappeared in terror. 'You property owners out there! Ladies and gentlemen in waiting! Will you stop milling outside our window or not? Nobody can get a wink of sleep with all that row going on.'

An angry black tuft of hair stood up on his head. Outside, perfect silence 'reigned' as they say. I burst out laughing and hid my face in my pillow.

'What's the matter with you?' Yasha turned on me.

But just then Comrade Gavarsaki walked in through the door from the yard without knocking. He stopped on the threshold and looked at us reproachfully, arms folded on his chest.

'What do you want, young man?' Yasha asked in a tone implying 'Go to hell'.

But Gavarsaki didn't even look at him. I should explain that Gavarsaki's appearance was against him. The long face and muddy skin, the long dark nose, slightly askew, the yellow circles round the mournful eyes, the shuffling gait, the mumbling voice – all spoke of failure and querulous resignation to fate.

For a long time Gavarsaki stood in silence, open-mouthed, his eyes slowly searching the room.

'There's a space there,' he said at last. 'Behind that door. It would take one carboy. The trouble is I've got three.'

Yasha's eyes widened with fear:

'What is he talking about? What does he want?'

'Or could I put them in your cupboard?' Gavarsaki asked calmly. 'They wouldn't harm your things. I use pure ether.'

'Ether?'

'Pure ether, I tell you. *Ether sulphuricus.* What did you think? I get three sacks of flour and a bottle of lamp-oil for every carboy. That's not to be sneezed at. Of course, if they find it they shoot you. But they'll never come to the lodge. Why should they? It's just an out-house. It's not like my room with the three carboys in the middle of it, like on a stage. It's got me worried, honestly comrades, it's a real headache.'

Yasha jumped out of bed, went up to Gavarsaki, and hissed with extraordinary venom:

'Get out! At once! Or I'll kick you through that door. Out!'

Gavarsaki scratched his head, blinked at me, asked, 'Is he always like that your friend? Sounds mental!' and reluctantly went out, closing the door carefully behind him.

Yasha locked it, blew out the wick-lamp and went back to bed, but he tossed for a long time in the dark, cursing the ill wind that had brought him to Black Sea Street.

I was dozing off when I smelt an unfamiliar, rather pungent smell. Suddenly I was floating, and my heart was gradually slowing down.

It stopped after a faint last flutter, without causing me any fear or pain, and a delightful freshness poured over me. I even laughed with pleasure.

Immediately, Yasha's voice roared as though from the centre of the earth:

'Get up! Quick! Ether!'

He jerked my arm. I tried to sit up but fell back. He seized me by the shoulders and dragged me, reeling, to the window.

'Get out into the garden,' he shouted, pushing me. 'Curse that Gavarsaki. Get out or we're finished! Hurry! Come on!'

I leaned with difficulty through the window. Someone from outside pulled me clear and picked me up. It was Torelli. Yasha climbed out after me. A strong, sharp smell filled the lodge.

'For God's sake,' Prosvirnyak shouted brokenly, 'don't smoke, don't strike a match. I beg of you! Or the building will go up. And don't go near the sewage pipe, you'll be killed.'

I came to. It was dawn. The garden was full of terrified lodgers, huddling against the walls. Torelli's sister lay on a blanket under the acacia tree.

'What has happened?' I asked. 'Has there been a search?'

'Nothing like that,' Torelli answered with forced heartiness. 'The Lord chose to work a miracle.'

At this, all the tenants began to laugh. The women rocked with laughter, covering their mouths with their shawls, the men shook silently, Torelli squealed and Prosvirnyak rumbled, stroking his beard. Even Yasha spluttered and choked.

I felt terrified.

'Stop!' I shouted. 'Tell me what's happened.'

It appeared that at two in the morning a search party had knocked up the house next door. Driven mad with terror, Gavarsaki rushed into the lavatory with his carboys, poured the ether down the drain, and immediately vanished without trace.

The fumes filled the building, poured along the pipes into the lodge and the next house, and seeped through flanges and manholes, out into the street and the other yards.

Everyone in our building and the next had got out safely. Torelli's sister was carried out just in time. Driven back by the fumes and the fear of being poisoned, the search party withdrew to the far end of the street and, after searching a few houses, went off at first light, swearing to find Gavarsaki even at the bottom of the sea, and knock his head off.

That day the belongings left in our garden went back to their owners, disappearing quickly and without fuss. Prosvirnyak swept the garden, a shower of rain laid the dust and washed away

all trace of the nocturnal commotion; and once again the blue seaside silence enveloped the lodge, never again to leave it.

Yasha moved back to town. Volodya Golovchiner moved into the lodge in his place.

The flats still smelt of ether. Gavarsaki turned up at the end of a week, safe, but exhausted and batty.

And although he had saved them from a house search, the tenants turned on him to a man. Never a day passed without some new comic story being spread about him.

Gavarsaki scratched his head and looked in vain for a drop of sympathy. They had none to give him. Only Volodya had the patience to listen to him, and even he, after Gavarsaki had gone, shook his head and sighed:

'What can you do with a chap like that!'

7
The Austrian Beach

Quarantine Wharf was sheltered from the sea by a high wall of concrete blocks. At its far end, it widened into the pier.

Violent winter storms had broken a wide gap in the wall and formed a small sandy beach on the side facing the sea. The first to use it had been Austrian soldiers during the Intervention, so this warm, cosy, secluded beach was known as 'Austria'.

It was further away from town than the wide beach of Langeron Bay, so those who went were mostly people fond of solitude – and perhaps also of the kind of old-fashioned marine views you hardly ever see except in old illustrated magazines. For to get to it, you had to walk right across the port, past half-buried, round dismantled mines, yellow and red buoys, stone steps leading to the water, signal-masts, old barges, coils of rotten rope and finally, a mysterious little house with a white turret and rusted balcony, standing on the breakwater. It had no windows on the first floor which made it look rather like a fort or a blockhouse.

The roof was of orange tiles. The wind often sang round the flagpole, and through the half-drawn curtains of the ground-floor window you could see faded maps on the wall and a stack of books on the windowsill. The house was uninhabited. Needless to say, I would have been the happiest of men had I been allowed to live in it.

I would have adorned it with new maps and books, and let it be aired through and through by the sea breeze and warmed by the sunshine, pink against the all-pervading blue.

The Austrian Beach

The Austrian beach was made for reading books that have to be read slowly, and set aside from time to time, while you dig about in the sand and by chance come across a fragment of rock crystal.

It was a wonderful place to doze. The wind from the sea tickled your eyelashes and the salt air stayed in your lungs and made you a little drunk.

Among the few people on the beach, I used to see Ilya Ilf (he was still known as Feinzilberg; the pen-name came later). I liked his quiet, sad face. He looked as though his head were full of half-dreams and half-stories and this was why he often fell asleep on the beach and had to be woken up at sunset.

Years later, I read some of the entries in his *Notebooks* and ever since I can't get rid of the idea that they all came to him just then, in 1921, on the Austrian beach. Here is one of them:

> 'I used to have soothing thoughts before I fell asleep. For instance, the English fleet sailing for Jutland: I looked long at the empty port and this lulled me to sleep. Tens of thousands of men were at sea. But the port was disquietingly calm and empty.'

'I looked long at the empty port.' There was no more usual and sad occupation in those days in Odessa, than looking at the empty port, and observing it in minute detail. The details were very attractive. The steady light, the heat of the noonday sun, and the taut waves playing nearby gave them all the vividness and beauty of the south.

I have been very active over the years. My activity often altered the course of my life and made me see it from new and unexpected angles.

But it never involved fuss, or useless chatter, or indiscriminate contacts with people.

On the contrary, it satisfied my thirst for observation – for examining life closely, as through a magnifying glass – and my desire to give it (in my imagination) much more poetry than it has in fact.

I could never help lending it extra colour and light, and the result pleased me, it increased its charm.

Even if I had very much wanted to, I could not have destroyed in myself this function which, as I understood later, is one of the essentials of the work of a writer. Perhaps because of this, my writing was to be more than an occupation or a job, it was to be my state of life, my interior state. I often caught myself out in living as though inside a novel or a story.

This need to look at life through a magnifying glass came upon me very strongly in Odessa and was no doubt connected with my wanderings about the port, and the peaceful hours I spent on the Austrian beach.

Time has worn away the biting sharpness of the sorrows and misfortunes of those days. Memory turns to them unwillingly. It prefers to see the brighter side and dwells on our rare joys. With the passing of the years they have grown in volume and significance. Neither typhus and famine, nor the cold in our little room and our complete uncertainty of tomorrow could destroy our faith in the happy destiny of the country.

Our youth was unconquerable. It would have turned Dante's Inferno into an exciting show. Our bodies swelling with hunger, we could still feel and rejoice in the scent of the first spring flower outside the window of our lodge.

Together with many of my contemporaries, I experienced and I remember those years as years of great and unshakable hope.

That hope was present to us always and in everything.

It reached us like a glimmer of sunshine through the heavy clouds of an Odessa winter day. All at once, a stalk of goosefoot in the yard, frozen and grey with rime, lit up with warm sunshine from no one knew where, and in this light we already felt the radiant approach of spring.

One day, Volodya and I were sitting on the Austrian beach when a short man with a lisp and languid eyes came up to us, a sailor's faded, shapeless cap in his hand.

The cap was full of apricots which he offered us.

After we had eaten them all up between us, he introduced him-

self as Evgeny Ivanov, a former correspondent of the *Russian Word.*

'You may have heard of me.' He smiled, showing small sharp teeth. 'I am known as an adventurer, but that's only one of those Odessa lies. I have a proposition to put to you, two propositions, in fact. Seriously, no joke.'

He put his cap on the back of his head and slapped me on the shoulder.

'Firstly – a paper called *The Seaman* is coming out in Odessa in a fortnight. You see before you its technical editor. I want you to work for me. I know you by hearsay. We'll have a paper to outshine the novels of Dumas *père.* Printed on special paper made of Saragossa seaweed. We'll hold all the seas in our fist just like that' – he clenched his little fist – 'and we'll squeeze stories out of them like orange juice, stories that will make collectors fifty years from now pay a hundred roubles for a back number of *The Seaman.*'

It was all lies of course. I looked at him. He was so carried away that he dribbled at the mouth like a baby.

'I'm not joking.' He laughed. 'I want you as assistant editor. Agreed?'

'Agreed,' I said without thinking.

Volodya refused a job on *The Seaman* on the grounds that he was section head at Oprodkomgub.

'Stick to your Oprodkomgub then,' Ivanov said haughtily, 'where you won't even get a tin of treacle so that you can give a ceremonial tea with maize rusks for the launching of our paper. You won't, you know. Well, my other proposition is simpler. Let's take our clothes off and go and gather shellfish on those rocks for supper. I've got the implement.'

He produced a jagged Austrian bayonet from inside his jacket.

Volodya didn't want to get his feet wet. He was an excellent swimmer but always bone lazy on the beach.

Ivanov and I undressed and waded out to the rocks.

'We can put the shellfish in my cap,' said Ivanov.

Gathering shellfish consisted in my lacerating my hands to prise them off the rocks with Ivanov's blunt bayonet while Ivanov collected them in his cap.

Our work was soon cut short. A woman's rough voice yelled from the beach:

'Zhenya! What d'you think you're doing? Come out at once!'

'Coming, Marina darling!' Ivanov called back ingratiatingly. 'I was only just . . . .'

'How long am I going to wait for you, you tramp?' came the voice, and at this point I saw her. 'Come out, I tell you. Do you want to catch pneumonia? If you don't care about yourself, you might at least think of the kids.'

'My wife,' Ivanov told me unnecessarily. 'Marina. She *would* turn up. A real bully. But she's a wonderful woman.'

Marina was huge, swarthy, ox-eyed and had a black moustache. Shaking hands with Volodya and me, she said:

'Come to supper this evening. I've got a piece of pork, we'll have it roast, with hominy. You don't know my Zhenya. Randy as a tom-cat, can't let him out of my sight. A real wolf. You wouldn't think it, a little chap like that, dainty as a ballerina. I will say, though, he's a wonderful journalist, for that he's really gifted. Only he will get himself mixed up in all sorts of stunts.'

'Shut up,' said Zhenya, hopping on one foot and pulling on his canvas trousers. 'Keep your nose out of my business. And my trouser belt is bust.'

'Has he asked you to join *The Seaman*?' Marina went on, paying no attention. 'You two will make a wonderful job of it. Only mind his tongue doesn't run away with him. He's got an impossible character.'

That was how I joined *The Seaman* on the Austrian beach, and I still think I was very lucky, as my subsequent story will show.

8

Glycerine Soap

Several things happened in the two weeks before I began to work for *The Seaman.* The saddest was the death of Torelli's sister, Rachel.

She caught spanish flu, then a new disease, had it very badly and developed complications.

Torelli stayed away from Oprodkomgub and looked after her like a nurse. Volodya and I often dropped in on her, although Torelli worried about our catching flu and kept trying to throw us out.

Volodya Golovchiner managed somehow to get hold of an old cake of glycerine soap and presented it to Rachel. Weak and feverish, she clasped her hands and blushed with pleasure so that her freckles stood out white.

We all examined the wonderful soap against the light. Golden and translucent, it still retained some of its subtle smell, though now rather stale.

One day Torelli had to go to town and needed someone to look after Rachel during his absence. He asked me to stay, but on condition I sat by the door.

By then I had left Oprodkomgub, so I was free.

Rachel lay with her eyes shut, smiling. She held the cake of soap in her hands, clutching it with her strong, violinist's fingers. She had studied under the famous Odessa violinist, Nahum Tokar.

Tokar was an excellent teacher, good at 'setting' his pupils'

hands and 'giving them fingers', but a practical, down-to-earth man of no refinement.

'Is that the way to play this piece?' he would bellow at some wretched student. 'Where's the softness, the subtlety, the sweetness? Think of your mother, Rosalia Yosifovna, making her famous cherry jam. You're just going to eat it, and your mouth actually waters with anticipation. That's how you have to play it – with anticipation! Anticipate! Anticipate! Anticipate! Anticipate!' He beat time crossly with his foot.

Rachel seldom spoke of her music. Now she opened her eyes and said:

'Don't tell Abram, but I know I'm going to die soon. And he'll have me buried in that Jewish cemetery, next to Papa and Mama, and brother Arkasha. It's such a boring place! Now, for goodness sake don't start telling me I'm going to get well, and have cheeks like tomatoes, and perhaps marry a bonny lad in a cowboy shirt with a silver watch-chain. I've heard it all dozens of times from Abram. Better tell me where Majorca is.'

'Why do you want to know?'

'We had a lecture about Chopin, they said he lived there. I've never thought about it since, but today I've had a dream about it. There were hills, and very, very shallow streams running down into the valleys – the water was very clear and warm, and they were as wide as from here to the Quarantine Wharf. They flowed over green meadows, and there were all sorts of flowers growing in them, rising above the water and swaying with the current. I waded across the streams barefoot, and I liked feeling the soft grass under my feet.'

She turned her head and looked through the window. Small white clouds flew like canon-balls over the tops of the acacias, as though old bronze guns were firing them from invisible ships.

'There's a poet living here in Odessa,' I said, 'George Shengeli. I heard him read his poetry once, in Moscow, during the war. I remember only three lines: "There are islands distant as dreams – gentle as a quiet alto – Majorca, Minorca, Malta and Rhodes. . . ." I've forgotten the rest. Chopin did live in Majorca, with Georges

Sand. In an abandoned monastery. He was very ill by then, dying, so the brilliant sunshine got on his nerves. . . .'

'Go on.'

But instead of waiting for me to continue, she said plaintively: 'Why did I have to be born into this family where everybody gets paralysed in the legs sooner or later? A legless, red-haired freak! That's not what I would have chosen! I'd like to sail in a rough sea, the wind grabbing at my knees! And to laugh, and sing! Does it disgust you when I talk like that? I'd sing you something now, only my chest feels so tight, as if it were strapped up.'

She broke off, and turned the glycerine soap over in her hands.

'Will you do me a favour?' she asked. 'Before Abram comes home. Pour some water into that saucer, and put the soap in it. And there's a dry bunch of flowers standing on top of that chest-of-drawers – get me a hollow stalk out of it, and bring it all here.'

I did as she asked. She split the tip of the stalk, dipped it in the soapy water, and slowly blew a large soap bubble.

It broke off, flew half way to the ceiling, and hung motionless in a dusty sunbeam, shining with pale, changing rainbow colours.

Rachel put her hand over her mouth, not to disturb the bubble with her breath. I, too, scarcely breathed.

'It's golden now,' said Rachel. 'A moment ago it was red like fire.'

She carefully blew another bubble, then a third, a fourth.

I picked a straw for myself, and also blew bubbles, so that soon the air was shimmering with their lights and colours.

A few landed on the floor and burst, but most of them kept afloat, playing in the sun, and sometimes joining into many-coloured constellations.

Downstairs, the front door clanged on its spring. The house shook. All the bubbles burst. Fine spray showered the floor.

'Hide it all away,' Rachel said quickly. 'I'm tired, I want to sleep. Now I'll never, never see it.'

'See what?'

'Majorca. Go now. Thank you. I don't feel very well.'

At the door, I bumped into Torelli. I told him his sister was

asleep, and he turned back into the kitchen, to put the kettle on.

That evening he came to the lodge, sat down on the door-step, and burst into tears. Rachel had died, probably from heart failure.

Tears pouring down his face, he sat looking at us with round red-rimmed eyes and blowing his nose into a torn pillowcase.

I found an old bottle of valerian in Schwittau's book-case. Most of it had evaporated. I poured what was left into the tin I used as a glass, sat beside Torelli and gave it him.

He drank obediently, then let his head drop into his arms and shook with sobs. Gasping, pressing the pillowcase to his eyes, he kept apologising brokenly for giving me so much trouble, and for dripping tears on my torn and dusty brown velveteen trousers.

The doctor who signed the death certificate said that, were it not for the flu, Rachel could have lived a long time. Torelli told us how she had given a loud cry and suddenly stopped breathing.

The day of the funeral we all went to the house. In the room where Rachel's body lay, Gavarsaki stood in the corner, twisting his greasy cap in his hands. His eyes showed nothing except a pathetic effort to understand what was going on.

Prosvirnyak came in, looked disapprovingly at Rachel's feet in their wooden clogs and spoke in a low voice to the verger from the synagogue. The verger nodded obsequiously and shouted something to the old crones who were busy round the coffin. The shabby black coffin, 'hired' for the occasion, had obviously served a hundred times before to transport the dead from town to cemetery in the ramshackle hearse.

The crones fetched a torn brown shawl from somewhere, covered Rachel's feet, and the unfrocked priest went off with the air of having done his duty.

'Cheek!' Yasha muttered after him. 'Making himself at home, and giving orders.' But Prosvirnyak pretended not to hear.

I had never been to a Jewish funeral before. I was struck by the hurry of the proceedings. The hearse arrived, drawn by a scraggy horse in dusty funeral trappings. The garrulous old driver came into the room, rapped the lid of the coffin with his whip-handle and said:

'Well, lads, who's the youngest? Grab it! Hoist it! All together! That's the way. Be careful at the bends. Whoever built that staircase, may he cough in hell, ought to be nailed up in that coffin instead of the young lady. Call it a staircase, it's a pain in the neck, so help me.'

Then we trudged along the cobbled streets, following the hearse. It jolted and swerved violently from side to side, as though trying to throw the coffin, like a restive horse its unwelcome rider.

The graveyard lay in the steppe, on the edge of the town. The steppe was burnt brown, although it was still early summer. Warm dust whirled in the wind against the high wall of the cemetery.

The wheel of the hearse caught on the gate-post. The driver had to back a little, but the horse refused to budge, so he beat it on the muzzle with his whip-handle.

Torelli shouted at him. The driver spat and said:

'Better cry over your sister instead of that skinny brute, if you are so soft-hearted.'

Torelli's eyes filled with tears. He stamped his little pointed shoes the colour of burnt orange peel, and screamed, all on one piercing note:

'Bastard! Swine! Moldavian thief!'

He was pitiful in his grief and anger.

The driver shrugged scornfully, lifted the back of the hearse, freed the wheel, then, without a backward glance, climbed into his seat, whipped up the horse and jogged away at a brisk trot, down the long graveyard avenue towards the grave. There was not a tree anywhere – all had been cut down for firewood – only the uniform yellow tombstones on either side of the unswept road.

The grave was a long way off. We ran after the hearse, together with a stumbling crowd of graveyard beggars.

The coffin was lowered into the ground. For some reason there was a lot of broken glass at the bottom of the pit.

Torelli gave alms to the beggars, a thousand roubles each (roubles had gone up in value). They accepted reluctantly, showing their dissatisfaction. One old woman with suppurating eyes flung the money into Rachel's grave and screamed:

'What d'you expect me to buy with your money? The hole in the breadround? Buy it yourself, millionaire!'

We went away crushed. Torelli cried, off and on, all the way home. The verger hobbled beside him, saying:

'I don't know what the world is coming to, Monsieur Blumkis! I'd sooner lie in the grave myself than bury people like that, I swear by my mother's life.'

For several days after the funeral I went nowhere, only climbed through the window of the lodge into the garden every morning. Prosvirnyak kept the garden locked, so there was never anyone there. Only Prosvirnyak himself occasionally turned up, but went off as soon as he saw me, even his back looking indignant.

After Rachel's funeral, Volodya and I ceased to take any notice of him. No one else paid him any attention either, even as a landlord.

He resented this deeply and bitterly. It was about this time that he began to seethe with lust for vengeance, and his secret hope of an upheaval and the overthrow of the regime, turned into an obsession which unbalanced his mind. The less hope of change there was in fact, the more haggard he looked, wizened and wild-eyed.

He no longer said hullo to us when we met, but only muttered something about 'Jew-loving intellectuals' and 'retribution for the innocent blood of Christ'. He looked crazier and crazier. Even his cook, Neonilla, who never had a word to say for herself, refused to stay on alone with him and moved into our tiny box-room. She wept every day and told us how he had threatened to kill her for 'going over to the Jews and heretics'.

She also told us that Prosvirnyak, a widower, had become unfrocked after the February Revolution in order to marry a rich Greek (priests are not allowed to remarry). But on the eve of the wedding the bride lost her nerve, and took herself and her money off to Greece.

One night I was woken up by a faint scraping of metal on metal. It seemed to come from the kitchen, which opened into the box-room where the maid slept.

I tiptoed to the glass door of the kitchen. In the garden, outside the box-room window, Prosvirnyak was squatting on his heels and working on the latch with a chisel.

He was too absorbed even to see me, his face wore a sly grin and he was muttering to himself.

Terrified, I cried out. He jumped up and fled, bounding across the garden into the yard and from there into the house, his old cassock flapping behind him like a pair of black wings.

I called Volodya. We went into the garden and looked at the window Prosvirnyak had been trying to open. Beneath it lay a five-pound weight and a German razor with a bone handle.

Volodya went for the police. Two hours later an ambulance arrived from the asylum. Two hefty male nurses tied Prosvirnyak's hands and took him away. He went quietly, moaning and whimpering to himself.

The maid left to stay with relations in Tiraspol. She was terrified of Prosvirnyak escaping and coming back to murder her.

Torelli moved soon afterwards. He was unhappy living in the flat where Rachel had died. A little later Gavarsaki was arrested for some unknown reason – probably the business with the ether. And one night the Professor of Ecclesiastical Law, a friend of Prosvirnyak's, who had occupied two of the flats, fled from Odessa together with his family.

By the end of summer, the building was empty. Boatswain Mironov moved in, a taciturn, red-haired native of Kherson, who was on *The Seaman*'s staff. For a bet, he could wrench the iron stakes out of the garden fence with one hand. After that everything was ship-shape in the house and garden.

I had only a few days left before I would start my job on *The Seaman*.

I read up all I could find in the Encyclopaedia about Majorca, Chopin, and Georges Sand, tried to recall everything I had ever read about them, and decided that nothing embellishes the events of our life like the passing of time.

Chopin and Georges Sand in Majorca lived a cheerless, difficult and unsettled life. Georges Sand had fallen out of love with the

sick musician. Chopin was lonely, tormented by his cough, the pain in his side, and by the wind and rain at night. He knew he was dying, and would never compose the wonderful music of which his genius was capable.

His life was being cut short by his illness. Perhaps it need not have been. He searched his memory for the day of the irreparable mistake. If only it were given to man to know his mistakes in time, before they are past help! But this is given to no one. We all leave this life without achieving a tenth of what is in us to achieve.

In the ancient monastery, its walls green with damp, an iron crucifix in every cell, he murmured against God. Why did men implore Him to forgive their sins? How petty were their individual sins, compared with the great collective sin of bloodshed, lies and hatred He had permitted to be their lot!

Yet this was the God he praised in majestic music, in the pealing of the organ and the voices of the choir, sweet as heavenly strings.

The monastery corridors smelt of mould and decay. The forest moaned beyond the barred windows. And all at once the glamour of the romantic atmosphere he and Georges Sand had sought, paled before the image of the simplest, even the poorest – poor but warm – Lithuanian room with an unpretentious piano, plain but comfortable bed – and peace.

He was tired of being a genius. He had no more use for it. He bore the title, or the nickname, as a burden, pleasing only to his friends.

But as the time passed, it carefully dropped all that was petty and bitter from the life of Chopin and Georges Sand on the island, and turned that life into a poem of sacrificial love.

The poem touched many hearts, including the heart of a red-haired Jewess in Odessa, who had never in her life seen anything more beautiful than glycerine soap bubbles.

Wherever I went I took with me *The Romantics,* a novel I had started writing long ago, in Taganrog. I wrote at such long intervals that it was a wonder to me that I hadn't lost the manuscript.

Now, in Odessa, I was working on the last chapters. As usual when I was busy writing, I became a savage. I avoided people, went off on my own, got up at two in the morning and worked by the light of the wick-lamp, afraid of Volodya waking up and asking me a lot of questions.

There was another odd thing I noticed about myself when I was working – if I was writing about something sad, I looked for sad situations and impressions, as though they could help me.

Early one morning I went to the Jewish cemetery, but soon came back, deafened by women's cries, hysterics, lamentations, frightened by the sight of sere old fingers clutching at coffins with such force that it took several men to pull them away, shaken by the silent weeping of widows, tearing their hair and trying to leap into their husbands' open graves. I came back troubled and confused by the sight of human grief naked and unadorned.

One evening, just as I was finishing the last chapter, a thin, fidgety young man came to see me and said he was the future publisher of *The Seaman,* Isaac Livshitz.

'Not with an *f* but with a *v*,' he added. 'Livshitz, not to be confused with Yasha Lifshitz.'

'Don't you like him?'

'It's not that,' said Livshitz (I was never, from that evening, to call him anything but Izya, as did everyone else). 'But he won't last long in our time.'

'Why not?'

'He hasn't got much sense of humour.'

Izya gave me a note from Ivanov, asking me to come to *The Seaman*'s office next day – it was time to settle down to the job.

He had brought with him a tall, incredibly thin man who wore puttees, had the profile of a minstrel, and a lock of beautiful chestnut hair hanging over his brow. The man held out a large, warm, friendly hand, and clicked his heels. After that, he went to the book-case, took down the first volume of the Professor's Encyclopaedia, turned the pages and removed all the tissue paper which protected the coloured illustrations and maps.

'Eddie!' Izya said severely, but the man with the profile didn't

give him a glance. He took down the second volume and extracted the tissue paper from that. 'Now we'll smoke,' he said, pleased.

'Eddie! You mustn't! It isn't nice!'

The tall man silently tore a strip of tissue paper, pressed it with a kind of special skill between his fingers, put it to his mouth – and the lodge filled with the clear, high but ringing and undeniably touching sound of the song of some small bird.

'Is that nicer?' asked the man.

It was uncanny. I could hear the beads of sound forming in the warm throat of the bird.

'I'm so sorry,' Izya pulled himself together. 'I forgot to introduce you. Our Odessa poet and bird watcher, Edward Bagritsky.'[14]

'You got it wrong as usual,' Bagritsky said in a deliberately hoarse voice. 'You should have said, "Bagration-Bagritsky, last scion of the princely Caucasian-Polish family descended from the Jewish tribe of Dzuba." Let's go swimming at Langeron.'

9
Chopping Furniture

I would like to give the reader some idea of the remarkable man who was *The Seaman*'s editor, Ivanov, and of the atmosphere in his office.

Actually, the editor appointed by the Sailors' Union was Party-member Pokhodkin, former captain of an ocean-going liner. But Ivanov's drive, imagination and resourcefulness proved too much for him and the aged captain virtually gave up his job and retired to his villa in Arcadia.

Ivanov, who, as I have already said, went about in a squashed naval cap, patched cavalry greatcoat and clogs on his bare feet, looked like a tramp. But no one had greater charm than this innocent-eyed boy. He looked twenty although he was getting on for forty.

He was an excellent storyteller. His sense of humour never left him, however desperate the situation, and he was always courteous.

Even in those days he was not afraid to kiss a woman's hand. It was said that he had very nearly got himself shot for this in Ribnitza, a town famous for its pretty Moldavian girls.

He really had been a reporter on the *Russian Word.* This part of his complicated story was confirmed by the former manager of the paper, a God-fearing old man, named Blagov, who had fled from Moscow to Odessa. He also said that Ivanov had been the racing correspondent and had betted heavily on the tote.

Ivanov took on Blagov as senior proof-reader. Blagov turned out to be terribly fussy. The smallest misprint brought him down

like a ton of bricks on whoever was responsible. Even Ivanov was afraid of him, not to speak of the compositors who trembled in his presence and looked like boys taking their school-leaving exam.

Ivanov was the kind of journalist who can find copy even in a ditch or a board meeting of the Society for the Insurance of Shorthorn Cattle.

Not only did he find 'copy' (the word at that time meant any interesting news) but he anticipated it. He knew where to look for it, he could tell from signs, known only to himself, what was going to happen and where.

In the same way he deduced from minute tokens, which no one else noticed, what people were likely to do. He knew what trifles can determine people's acts and motives. He was not afraid of rummaging among this litter and would often come up with 'a pearl, or a blood-stained dagger' or even 'an intrepid human heart', as our slicker Sukhodolsky put it.

An exuberant old man, Sukhodolsky would shout at us as he made up the paper:

'Do you know what our Zhenya could have been? A Balzac! A Balzac, I tell you. Or a Lombrozo!'

Ivanov had his own way of selecting his staff. He judged them by three qualities. They had either to be young and gifted (these had priority), or experienced and 'proven', or else barefaced liars and adventurers. Perhaps this was because he was himself a classical though harmless schemer, the very one who found the goose that laid the golden eggs.

He was always in the thick of new projects. Some he carried out in *The Seaman* – either successfully or landing himself in a major or minor row. But most of them had a life-span of a few hours. Ivanov gave them up with surprising lightness.

The first one he put through seemed to us interesting and in any case novel.

Above the heading, where every other paper carried the motto 'Workers of all lands, unite!', we were to print our own, a genuinely naval one – 'Workers of all seas, unite!'

A picture of the Vorontsov lighthouse duly appeared over the

heading. It shed four beams, and the slogan was printed on them in four languages – English, Russian, French and German.

But the issue was the first and last of its kind. Ivanov was summoned by the Provincial Committee. He came back paler and more handsome than ever, and ordered the stereo to be destroyed at once and a new one made, still with the Vorontsov lighthouse and the four beams, but with the correct slogan.

When the blockade was lifted and foreign ships began to arrive, part of the edition was printed specially for foreign sailors in their own languages.

It was Ivanov who introduced this innovation which made *The Seaman* popular among foreign crews.

After that, we were besieged by translators. There was even an Abyssinian who turned up one day – brown, friendly and hungry. But as Abyssinia had no fleet, we had to decline his services.

He went away in tears. But Ivanov had a warm and generous heart. He brought him back, questioned him, and found out that Bartholomew (this was the Abyssinian's name) had been sent to Russia before the revolution to study at the university of Kazan and was now reduced to working as a barber. This gave Ivanov an idea: he appointed him official barber to *The Seaman*'s office which, literally, within a week of the first issue, had turned into a noisy club for writers and sailors. Plenty of people came in and out so the gentle Abyssinian was soon assured of a wide clientele.

The senior translator of *The Seaman* specialised in English and was a former shipping agent called Moser, fat, beaming, friendly and polite. He was a great expert on shipping, the intricacies of naval treaties and laws, and the cargo fleets and naval traditions of the world.

Wearing out the last of his English suits, he looked among us, skinny ragamuffins, like a veritable Lord of the Admiralty.

Our translator from the French was his wife. Tall and thin as an Englishwoman, a bit prim and very much the woman of the world, she struck us in those days as something of a museum piece.

She was an unusually conscientious translator. Every misprint

made her ill, though in a lady-like manner. She lay moaning all day long on the dilapidated sofa in her room, sniffing the last remnant of her smelling salts and pressing to her temples a lace handkerchief moistened at the tap of the communal kitchen, where a certain 'Madame' Zofer held sway.

For hours on end, this imposing matron would shout her views in a deafening voice. Every sentence began with her favourite expression 'In days gone by. . . .'

'In days gone by I would not have dreamt of touching this hominy. I had the very best white bread every day. . . .'

A moment later her voice rang out again, but on a very different theme:

'In days gone by we gave birth to normal children, not like yours, my dear. God only knows what they are – kittens or something.'

At first Mrs Moser was embarrassed by Madame Zofer's loud and coarse pronouncements. But conventions are quickly shed, and very soon she was calmly telling me, as she sniffed her smelling salts, 'Wish she'd stop her barrel organ, that old tart!' and, by the end of a month on *The Seaman*, 'Madame' Moser was fluent in sailors' slang.

We printed anything in any way related to the sea and to sailing. After a while our hunt for suitable material became fiercely competitive.

At one time Mrs Moser looked like winning. She translated some marvellous poems by Tristan Corbière, a half-forgotten French sailor and poet. We printed a whole cycle with a biographical note by Jules Lafargue. It said that Corbière was a sailor from his boyhood up, always went about in clogs and a checked cloak, published his one book of poetry in Paris in 1873, and died soon afterwards while still a young man.

Lafargue wrote in his elegant French that Corbière's poetry was 'full of daring, strength, vivacity, tautness, and sad and stinging irony'.

But very soon boatswain Moronov, our Black Sea Street neighbour, snatched the laurels from Mrs Moser's feeble grasp. On an

old English cargo boat, named with inexplicable tenderness, '*Heart of Ellen*' (it was a grimy steamer with patches of red lead on the sides and smelling of guano), he got hold of a manuscript called the *Sailor's Bible.*

It was written in Australian sailors' jargon and seemed to us a piece of folklore unique in the world.

Mironov had been lent several chapters. They had to be quickly copied out as the *Heart of Ellen* was leaving for Edinburgh in two days. (This was of course after the lifting of the blockade.) The whole office was kept busy copying under Mrs Moser's and Mironov's guidance.

The first chapter was on 'The Great Prayer'. This was the name given to the great slab of sandstone used for scouring the decks of sailing ships. There were other, smaller stones which were also named after various prayers – Pater Noster, Ave Maria, Mater Dolorosa and Miserere.

Scouring the deck with the Great Prayer was a form of punishment.

The *Sailor's Bible* described the hard lot of the sailors on the old sailing ships plying mainly between Europe and Australia around Cape Horn.

Whole sections were devoted to stale food, 'dog watches', illness, foul air in the hold, and the way to deal with these troubles in tropical waters.

A chapter on the 'Ocean's Cunning' covered every unpleasantness which a sailor could expect in the Atlantic and Pacific, especially in the 'roaring' forties. There was nothing vague about it; it described specific incidents remembered by generations of sailors: hurricanes, waterspouts, 'tsunams' (tidal waves caused by underwater earthquakes), storms and shipwrecks; and of course the omens feared on sailing ships (and other ships as well): St Elmo's fire at the top of the mast, blood-red rainbows, and the *Flying Dutchman,* its rigging hung with spiderwebs even in a storm.

There was also a 'Warning to Sailors' – the names of captains of whom sailors should beware (and a list of their crimes against their crews), a list of 'dirty dogs' – agents who 'shanghaied' men on

board (mainly in the ports of Latin America and China); they made the men drunk and got them to sign unfair agreements. A list of dishonest tattooers; of bars in all the main ports, where sailors' possessions were taken as pledges; and of boarding houses where the lodgers were pursued by the Salvation Army.

The *Sailor's Bible* dispelled the more naive and romantic of our notions about the life of the toilers of the sea.

The facts themselves made you feel the anger built up over decades. The book was 'subversive', even though there was not a single slogan or appeal in it.

I am in a difficulty about Mironov. I should have liked to describe him here, but, having already published a story about him, I don't want to repeat myself.

I'll try to describe him as fully as I did in the story, but from another angle.

His most striking characteristics were his profound reticence, and his amused and friendly expression. This he reserved for those he considered to be 'real eccentrics'.

He had sailed from end to end of the Pacific Ocean. I doubt if even Stevenson could have done justice to his story, but in practice no writer would have attempted it because it was impossible to extract the facts from Mironov.

I managed to get only the main outline. Mironov was a revolutionary in the simplest sense of the word. To begin with, he was down on every dog of a captain and his underling, the mate. He believed in the mighty brotherhood of the workers, and that sailing was much the most suitable job for a revolutionary:

'Just look at the opportunities. You can spread the message all over the world, just like the wind spreading the smoke from the funnel. That's what you have to understand.'

It took me a good two months to establish, firstly, that Mironov had seen the first steamer 'made of glass', secondly, that he had spent two months in prison in New Orleans for having sided with the Negroes in a fight with the police ('We turned those policemen inside-out,' he modestly told me), and, thirdly, that he had been to

the Kergouelen Archipelago, known to sailors as the Island of Despair.

There was nothing more I could get out of him, so I gave him up as a bad job.

His recollections, if you could call them that, were mainly climatic.

'Have you been to New Guinea?'

'Well, of course,' he replied dejectedly. 'Naturally. You can't avoid it there' ('there' meant Melanesia). 'It's always sticking up in your way.'

'What's it like?'

'What do you mean – like?'

'What sort of place is it?'

'Not bad,' Mironov replied doubtfully. 'Only it's as hot as a steam bath. Wouldn't suit you at all.'

'Have you ever been to Peru?' I asked him another time.

'Yes, of course.'

'What's it like?'

'What do you mean – like?'

'What kind of a place is it?'

'A grave!' Mironov replied. 'Hot as a furnace and not a breath of air. And the sea-water, incidentally, is like ice. You can't even bathe.'

Mironov spent a long time in Odessa, waiting for a ship, so he attached himself to *The Seaman* where he was used as a one-man information service on anything to do with steamers and sailing ships.

In these matters his knowledge was unequalled, even by Moser. So Ivanov put him on the staff, but he couldn't think what to call him, until at last Izya Livshitz suggested the grandiloquent title 'World Tonnage Consultant'.

The Consultant spent his evenings in Black Sea Street sitting on a bench in the yard, smoking, gazing at the stars and softly singing a Ukrainian song which had nothing to do with the sea:

Unharness the horses, lads,
And lay you down to rest.

He sang, smoked and enjoyed himself, never suspecting that his day of glory was at hand.

An enquiry came from Moscow, I think from the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, about the cargo fleet which the Whites had taken away. It was easy enough to list the ships, but the Commissariat wanted to know what had happened to them: where they were and under what flag they were sailing now.

Moser threw up his hands. Who could possibly tell what had happened to all those ships! You might discover something from the foreign newspapers which occasionally turned up in Odessa, but only about two or three, if that.

He suggested calling in former shipping agents, captains of ships and experienced sailors generally, to see what we could get by cross-examining them.

The meeting was held. Cigarette smoke billowed out through the window like smoke from a ship's funnel. The experienced sailors sat in unbuttoned tunics and damp striped vests, they mopped their faces, their bald pates shone like beaten copper, they were hoarse and weary, but they knew the fate of only one steamer, and even that only approximately.

Meanwhile, Mironov had appeared in the office. Blushing crimson and catching at the chairs, he went up to Ivanov and said in a whisper that could be heard next door:

'Chuck it, Evgeny Nikolayevich! This won't get you anywhere. Get somebody to take it down and I'll tell you. You can check up later when you get the chance. I'll answer for any mistake with my life.'

The sailors looked at one another, grinned, moved up closer and waited.

Mironov took a chair at a distance from the desk, clutched his cap in both hands, fixed his eyes on the corner of the room lit by the sunset, where the delicate shadow of an acacia trembled on the wall, and began:

'Write down: Steamer *Grand Duke Alexis,* formerly owned by ROPIT, sold to Messageries Maritimes, re-named *Toulouse,* plies under French flag between Marseilles, Genoa and Corsica. The

boilers have been cleaned but the French repair work is poor. The French crew are a poor lot but the first mate is still Grigory Pavlovich Mostovenko.'

The sailors stirred and sighed.

'Go on writing,' Mironov said, unruffled. 'Ocean going liner *Kostroma.* Belonged to the Volunteer Fleet, now sails under Italian flag from Brindisi to Massawa and Somali, calling at Alexandria. Painted white and re-named *Basilicata.* The boilers have not been cleaned, so her speed is very low. They keep her for non-urgent runs – in the back-yard as you might say. Crew – all black.'

By the time Mironov had gone through the list, a mother-of-pearl dawn was breaking over the sea, the first birds were twittering cautiously in the plane trees on the boulevard, and it smelt strongly of mattiola.

Nearly all the sailors were still there. They were pale with sleeplessness, and looked even paler in the chilly dawn pouring through the window.

Mironov's performance was amazing, inexplicable. He seemed to have the gift of total recall.

The sailors roused themselves, went up to him, firmly shook his hand and reluctantly went home; they wished they could go on talking about 'our sea and our ships', the ships they knew to the last sun-warmed rivet and scratch on the oak planks.

Mironov's fame spread across the Black Sea. It may well have reached Turkey and even Greece. Sailors have their own, rapid and mysterious postal service.

The Commissariat of Foreign Affairs sent Mironov a letter of thanks.

Embarrassed by his triumph, Mironov fled to his relations in Kherson, explaining, as he said goodbye to Volodya and me, that he didn't want 'this thing to go to his head'.

Before I finish with Ivanov, I ought to relate a number of incidents showing his intractable character. But for the time being one will do.

Most of the actions ascribed to his aggressiveness and wilfulness

were due to his fanatical devotion to the paper. Nothing in the world mattered to him more than *The Seaman.*

His enthusiasm infected not only his colleagues but his wife Marina (she scolded him out of habit but no one took any notice), and his two little girls. There was no hardship he would have refused to bear, or his family to put up with uncomplainingly, for the sake of their beloved paper.

The winter of 1921 in Odessa was cold, windy and stormy. It seemed colder even than in Moscow because the porous stone of which the town was built let in the piercing damp of the seaside. Covered with a film of ice, houses and roads shone like enamel. The wind howled with misery in all the streets that ran from south to north; only in the narrow sidestreets did it lose a little of its strength so that you could recover your breath.

The joints of our fingers were again swollen and bleeding. The sea was frozen all the way to Great Fountain lighthouse. The Bulgarian steamer *Varna* lay caught in the ice-floes at the mouth of the harbour.

I found among the Professor's books an untouched calendar for the year 1916, and hung it on the wall, as some sort of reminder of the passing of time.

It seemed to pass more and more slowly, as though it were freezing up. Between the frost and the first warm days lay the thick wad of dusty, yellow calendar leaves.

The office was even colder than the lodge. It was housed in a large villa next to the Vorontsov Palace. The pale frescoes on the walls, and the stained-glass windows – especially the blue ones – chilled us to the bone.

We all huddled into one room, where there was an iron *bourzhouika* with a sooty pipe fitted to the window. Every now and then a smelly, oily liquid dripped from the pipe on to our heads and manuscripts.

Next to the *bourzhouika,* sat the typist Lucienna Hinson, a cheerful, noisy girl generally known as a 'Mediterranean beauty' and universally envied for her place in the room. But even Lucienna became soured.

Chopping Furniture

Kinti, the Rumanian manager who went about armour-plated in a thick black overcoat, had failed to produce so much as one armful of logs. He justified himself – unbuttoning his coat and beating the breast-pockets of his old field-jacket – by the fact that there was not a log to be found between Odessa and Vinnitsa, may he be hanged next to the Richelieu monument if there was.

'Stop beating the dust out of your jacket,' Lucienna snapped at him. 'And in general, do stop your "shmekeria".'

None of us knew what 'shmekeria' was, not even Lucienna, but it drove Kinti mad. He ran round in circles, grunting, wheezing, croaking, spitting, and seeming about to explode with a flash and a thunder clap – it was positively dangerous to be near him.

It took us several days to discover that the word was quite innocuous: all it meant was 'swindle'.

Finally, one day, life in the office came to a standstill. Our fingers could no longer hold our pens.

Then Ivanov ordered an oak sideboard as big as a Gothic church to be brought from the basement and broken up for firewood.

As I arrived at the office and was still in the icy entrance hall, I heard the cheerful sound of axe-blows and cracking timber, shouts, laughter and the fire roaring in our red-hot *bourzhouika*.

Inspired and pale with anger, Ivanov was directing operation break-up. He was furious with the owners of the paper, the Regional Water Transport Board, for not ensuring the supply of fuel to the office. Driven desperate, he had staked his all.

Just when the operation was in full swing, Kinti burst in, his hair standing on end, raised his arms to heaven and screamed that at this very moment a special, urgent, plenary, extraordinary session of the Water Transport Board was being held to discuss the lawless incident at *The Seaman*.

We merely chopped faster. The session took two hours and, by the time it was over, the sideboard and a china cupboard as well were in splinters. The wood lay stacked against the wall, and the *bourzhouika* roared like a squadron of planes.

Ivanov was severely reprimanded by the Board, and ordered to print the text of the reprimand in *The Seaman*.

One of our contributers was the satirist, poet and feature writer, Yadov, who wrote under the pseudonym of 'Boatswain Jacob'.

Ivanov commissioned him to write a poem on the chopping up of the furniture and published it in the next issue, with the text of the reprimand in small type underneath as an epigraph.

I remember only four lines of the poem:

The press is vital in our land.
I'll guard it with my dying breath.
My pen will never leave my hand,
Nor shall my colleagues freeze to death.

After the destruction of the furniture or, as they called it in Odessa, 'the chopping party', the Odessa naval authorities became more cautious in their dealings with Ivanov and hardly ever interfered with the running of the paper.

10

Linen Press-Cards

Before the revolution, *The Seaman* had been an obscure underground paper. Printed in Egypt, in Alexandria, it was taken to Russia by trusty people, usually stokers, who distributed it in various ports.

It came out at long and irregular intervals and looked more like a leaflet than a newspaper. One of its collaborators in those far-off days, an old member of the underground who had suffered some injury in the course of his work, had persuaded Ivanov to issue the permanent members of his staff with press-cards printed on fine linen, so that they could, if necessary, be sewn into the lining of a jacket or coat.

It seemed senseless to us. We knew that none of us would be sent on special assignments abroad, and refused to believe that we would ever have to go into hiding at home.

We chuckled over these extraordinary documents printed on long strips like tokens in a children's game and bearing a seal with two crossed naval anchors.

Difficult enough to unfold and decipher, the limp rags inspired nothing but distrust in all who saw them.

In the end, we put them away as souvenirs and, for practical purposes, were issued with ordinary press-cards typed by Lucienna.

The Seaman had other distinctive characteristics as well. It was not printed on ordinary paper but on the back of coloured stickers for packets of tea. No newsprint was available in Odessa. The

stocks were only just sufficient for the main newspaper, *Odessa News*.

So, although the publication of *The Seaman* was authorised, we found that there was nothing to print it on. Luckily, Ivanov heard of a large stock of now unwanted Tsarist stickers lying in the customs shed.

Printed on thin, semi-transparent sheets, about the size of a double-spread, they were blank on one side and kept the printer's ink from seeping through the glossy papers.

The sheets came in various colours, depending on the brand of tea, but for some reason all pastel – mauve, cream, grey, pink, and so on.

Before the revolution the sheets had been cut into narrow strips and stuck round packets of tea. They showed the brand and the weight and were stamped with the Russian State emblem – a small two-headed eagle.

Because of the eagles, it took Ivanov a long time to get permission to use the stickers. He lost his voice arguing that printing the paper on them was in no sense monarchist propaganda.

We tried to keep to one colour for each day of the week – Tuesday was always mauve, for instance, and Wednesday pink – and usually succeeded in doing so.

Very exceptionally, for so-called holiday numbers, we were issued with white paper. But you could only call it white if you were looking at it in the dark. Grey, coarse and thick as wrapping paper, it was interlaid with large fine shavings of wood (you could even see the grain).

The ink would not take on the wood, so the holiday numbers looked striped and speckled. The letters were not printed but moulded by the type as in books for the blind.

But neither grey paper nor poor ink put us off. They made us even more devoted to *The Seaman* than if it had been slick and smart.

We put so much zest, effort and ingenuity into our work that the popularity of the paper was our best reward. The paper sold out in a flash. Copies were literally torn from our hands.

Apart from linen press-cards and sticker paper, *The Seaman* was distinguished by the number of devoted collaborators who were not paid a penny in cash. They were more than satisfied to work for a trifling fee in kind.

Whatever Kinti could get hold of was handed out: slabs of washing-blue as hard as cobbles, bent mother-of-pearl buttons, mouldy Cuban tobacco, rusty rock salt (it melted there and then, in the office, forming a corrosive red solution), and foot-rags of velveteen.

These good things were shared out between us by the irrepressible Lucienna. All she did, if anyone complained, was sing a comic song, imitating a cabaret singer and tapping the rousing beat with her clogs:

Endure a while,
Hold on a while,
The way is clear,
The port is near!

Everyone endured patiently, of course, and there were no complaints, not even from the recipient of the velveteen foot-rags.

Ivanov had issued sixty linen press-cards to permanent members of the staff.

But, besides its permanent staff, *The Seaman* had many worker correspondents and friends – people who nowadays would be called 'sympathisers'.

At first there were worker correspondents only in Odessa and the neighbouring ports – Ochakov, Nikolayev, Kherson, Ovidiopol, Zburyevka and Stanislavov. But the number grew as the Black Sea coast was liberated from the Whites. Soon they appeared in Rostov-on-Don, Taganrog, Mariupol, Berdyansk, then in Novorossisk and along the Caucasian coast and finally in the Crimea.

The Odessa worker-correspondents, from captains to stokers, used the editorial office as their club. All day long the kettle roared, Lucienna brewed carrot tea, and the rumble of voices, smokers' coughs and ringing laughter rolled over the waves of smoke-grey air.

As for the permanent staff, they were a mixed, noisy, ribald, picturesque community.

Occasionally the club was visited by 'old men' (by this we meant anyone over forty). There was the old bolshevik, Achkanov, a member of the underground in the days of the French occupation of Odessa, and a friend and exacting patron of *The Seaman*; there was the grey-haired and embarrassingly polite writer, Simon Yushkevich. But for the most part, the 'club' was composed of the fiery and impatient tribe of sailors and journalists.

'Learn to work and wait,' said Achkanov, as he listened to us. 'Socialism won't drop into your lap like dates from a palm-tree.'

We knew perfectly well that the revolutionary changes must take time, but we felt like skipping the hard, strenuous years and talking about the final outcome of the revolution – victory and happiness.

Sometimes we sat up at the club till dawn, and the golden light in the eastern sky seemed to us youngsters, in our lyrical mood, the glow of approaching happiness, a reflection of the golden age so near at hand.

The golden light in the sky merged with the golden glitter of the sea. Even the steppes of Dofinovka, on the far side of the bay, shone in the sun as though preparing to rejoice.

What didn't we talk about at the club! The mutiny on the *Potemkin,* the shooting up of the revolutionary cruiser *Ochakov* in Sebastopol, 'Execution Island' Berezan, the advantages of Kherson oak schooners, the qualities of Sanzheyka melons, the best way to clean the glass in a lighthouse lamp, the speed of red-mullet, the Greco-Turkish war, Barbusse's novel *Fire,* which had reached Odessa, how to repair a floating dock, make sheep's milk cheese, and shoot from captured Austrian Mannlicher rifles.

Listening to these conversations over carrot tea was rather like reading an encyclopaedia of revolutionary, literary, naval and current terms, only much better because what we heard was a living, vivid, racy, precise language, full of wonderful intonations.

It was a mine of linguistic ore, and probably that was why young

Odessa writers, who were later to become famous, spent their time at this revolutionary 'club'. A particularly frequent visitor was Edward Bagritsky.

As I can't describe all *The Seaman*'s contributors – although I wish I could – I will mention only a few, almost at random.

We had two feature writers – Yadov ('Boatswain Jacob') and the prose writer Vasily Reginin.

Yadov would perch on the edge of a chair and dash off his comic songs in a few minutes, without revising. By next day the songs were known to the whole of Odessa and a month or two later might well have reached Moscow.

Yadov was compliant and vulnerable. He would have had a hard life had it not been for the immense popularity of his songs with the workers and dockers of Odessa. This made him an asset to newspaper editors, cabaret managers and various music hall artists. He willingly wrote for them for next to nothing.

He looked very like a docker himself - bareheaded, in his faded blue smock, the pockets of his baggy trousers full of loose tobacco. Only his still face, gay and sad at the same time, made you think of an ageing comedian.

He was not the only one of his kind in Odessa. Miron Yampolski was a gifted poet and an expert on local folklore. His best-known song was 'Shneyerson's Wedding' ('It's terribly noisy in Shneyerson's house') which caught on all over the south. It contained some highly-coloured passages, such as the arrival at the wedding of the housing authorities to the strains of a swaggering march:

There comes the Chairman, milkman Abram,
Complete with his suite like a Tsar. . . .

The song and its sequel, 'Shneyerson's happiness was short-lived', could only have been written by a native Odessan who knew its suburban mythology inside out.

Nearly all the local songs were by nameless Odessan authors. Not even the city know-alls could remember who had written 'Hullo my Lyubka, hullo my love' – Georgie from Stevie's Street or Abram Knysh ('Do you mean to say you don't know him? –

That crook who got shot in the post-office hold-up in Tiraspol!')

The fashion in songs changed often. There was a new favourite at least once a year and sometimes once a month. The whole of Odessa sang them.

Anyone who knew them all could fairly accurately re-establish the chronology of the events in Odessa.

'Rostislav' for instance, and 'Diamonds' ('Our war-cry is "Serve the Republic, murder the public" ') were sung in 1918, while 'Denikin's unlucky, Budenny is winning, shall I go out and wave a red flag?' was sung in 1920 when Denikin's cause was lost.

I remember everybody singing 'Midshipman Johnson', then 'O these gloomy autumn days', 'Chicken', 'Two thieves broke jail in Odessa', 'My little daughter Bronya' and 'Manya comes into the Hall'.

After that came the more recent ones, such as the famous bandit song:

The C.I.D. is sending wires
About the thieves in Kharkov town.
They say the situation now requires
Urgent action to put them down.

This could be sung for ever, the name of the town varying at the performer's choice – Kiev, Yalta, Golta, Sochi or even far-away Vyatka.

Songs continued to pour from Odessa, but the stream was drying up; it ceased in 1941, on the eve of the war.

During the war the frivolous, garrulous Odessans, amateurs of comic songs and known as 'babbling brooks', fought with grim courage – though they still cracked Odessan jokes – and showed such daring and selflessness that even the enemy were astonished.

Old fishermen and sailors, for whom no room could be found on the ships, fought like the rest, desperately defending their Odessa, a town where work went with gaiety, as noisy and exuberant as the rolling waves of the Black Sea.

New songs came after the war, celebrating their feats and their unwavering love of their city.

In the spring of 1922, I left Odessa and spent several months in the Caucasus, in Batumi.

One day, I came across Yadov sitting alone, hunched up, on the Promenade. An old straw hat pulled down over his eyes, he was drawing with his stick on the sand.

I went up to him. We were both delighted to meet again and went off together to eat at the Miramar.

The restaurant was crowded and smelt of shashlik and purple Isabella wine. There was a string orchestra (this was before the days of Jazz and few people had even heard of saxophones). It played a pot pourri from various operettas, then struck up Yadov's famous song 'Bubliki'.

Yadov grinned, examining the wine-stained tablecloth. I went up to the leader of the orchestra and told him that the author of the song, Yadov from Odessa, was there.

All the musicians came over and stood round our table. The conductor raised his hand and the rollicking tune thundered out under the smoke-blackened vaults.

Yadov stood up. Everybody else got up too and clapped. He offered the musicians wine and they toasted him with flowery speeches.

Yadov was moved, he thanked everyone, but whispered to me that he would like to leave at once.

Outside, he took my arm and we went towards the sea-front. Yadov leaned heavily on my arm, limping a little. The sun had almost set. Far away, a violet mist hung over the Anatolian coast and above it a fiery band of smouldering clouds. The streets smelt festively of mimosa.

Pointing with his stick at the clouds, Yadov said suddenly:

'And like sleeping nature's dreams
Billowing clouds drift by. . . .'

I glanced at him in amazement. He chuckled.

'That was Fet,' he said. 'He's like the rabbi in Brodsky's synagogue.[15] But seriously, you know, I was never meant to be a clown, especially in verse. I was meant to be a lyrical poet. But there, I never made it. No one ever told me that, in all circum-

stances of life, you must fight like a savage. On the contrary, they taught me, from my childhood up, to bow and scrape. And now it's too late. Now poetry flows past me like a river in spate, and I stand on the bank, and look and love and envy. But I can't write anything real. There are too many silly tunes playing in my head like on a xylophone.'

'But don't you write lyrical poetry for yourself?'

'Certainly not! I still have enough intelligence and taste left, thank goodness, to know that that's all finished for me. There are people who are conscious of their gifts, of their genius. Well, I'm conscious of my impotence. That's tougher. Can you remember who was that quite outstanding German poet who suddenly one day sat down and wrote doggerel? All his talent had evaporated. Apparently, he had treated it with a carelessness amounting to criminal negligence. After that he never wrote anything worth while again. It wasn't even fit for the gutter press. So he changed his profession and took to concocting poison out of bedbugs. Even that was more useful. To humanity.'

'It's a sin to talk like that, Jacob Semyonovich,' I said, genuinely horrified.

'My dear chap, I've thought it all out long ago. I'm not in despair. I know I frittered away my talent on a lot of greedy, cheeky, commercial entrepreneurs. But if I hadn't, and were still alive today, I might have written a second Marseillaise. Anyway, thank you for your kind words.'

We said goodbye. The first raindrops fell from the dark sky. I walked home quickly, listening to the steady noise of the rain approaching from the sea.

I never met Yadov again but I remember his sad clown's face with the deep creases round the mouth and the tragic eyes.

Every writer and journalist in Russia knew Vasily Reginin ('Vasya' as he was called by everyone all his life).

I met him through *The Seaman* in Odessa, but had already heard about him from Yasha Lifshitz, Blagov, Ivanov and the other older journalists.

The most improbable tales were told about him, they sounded more like anecdotes. He seemed to have the kind of daring rarely shown by Russian journalists – rather like Stanley who pursued Livingstone to darkest Africa out of sheer sporting instinct. In Russia there was scarcely another journalist of Reginin's sort. Yet in everyday life he seemed a reasonable, even a cautious man.

He had lived in Petersburg before the revolution and edited several cheap and reckless 'yellow' periodicals such as the *Blue Journal* and the mass-consumption *Argos* and *I Know All.* He did it with imagination and go, and had his own circle of readers.

Serious people were used to the dull but high-minded *Russia's Wealth,* the staid *European Herald,* to *Niva* with its magnificent supplements, to the *Journal for All* and the progressive *Chronicle.* The omnivorousness of Reginin's magazines, well-illustrated but merely entertaining, put them off.

But the yellow journals multiplied. Inevitably they began to compete. Chasing after subscribers, they resorted to low stunts such as the *Blue Journal* competition for the best grimace. A valuable prize was offered.

There were many competitors, and photographs of people pulling faces appeared in issue after issue.

The circulation went up, but the competition could not go on for ever. It was time to think of something new and equally striking.

An announcement appeared in the Petersburg press: on such-and-such a date, at the Cinezelli Circus, Vasily Reginin, editor of the *Blue Journal,* would go into the tigers' cage, alone and unarmed, sit at a table where he would be served coffee and cakes and, after a leisurely meal, walk out unscathed.

Photographs and a full report, including Reginin's first-hand impressions, would appear in the *Blue Journal* which reserved all rights.

The day of Reginin's rendez-vous with the tigers, the circus was packed to the roof. Mounted police cordoned off the building.

Reginin, his face thickly powdered and a chrysanthemum in the

buttonhole of his frock coat, calmly walked into the tigers' cage, sat down, and had coffee.

The tigers were stunned by the impudence. Huddled in a corner of the cage, they gazed at him in fear, growling softly.

No one breathed. Attendants with fire hoses stood close to the bars.

Reginin finished his coffee and, still facing the tigers, backed to the door and swiftly stepped out.

At that moment the tigers, realising they had missed their prey, leapt after him with a terrible roar and, clawing at the bars, tried to tear them down.

Women fainted. The public howled with delight. Children cried. The attendants soused the tigers with cold water from their hoses. Outside, the mounted police held back the seething crowds from the doors of the building.

Reginin threw his fur-lined coat over his shoulders and strolled out casually, twirling his cane.

I only half-believed this story until Reginin showed me the photos of himself and the tigers. 'I was just a kid then,' he said, making a face. 'I was showing off. Still, it certainly bumped up the circulation.'

I knew Reginin in middle age and as an old man, and I noticed that he kept a touch of the buffoon to the end of his days. It showed in his jokes and in his taste for the unusual, the flashy, the garish.

When he left Odessa, he went to Moscow and edited one of our most interesting periodicals, *Thirty Days.*

All his experience as a journalist went into it and it was a brilliant job.

Thirty Days serialised Ilf and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs* at a time when all other periodicals and publishers preferred to keep away from this amazing but frightening story.

Reginin collected the best writers and poets, and all the promising youngsters (who have since become established authors and even 'classics'), and made them work for *Thirty Days.*

He told me with offhand pride that all the writers and poets of

the thirties, without exception, had contributed to his magazine. As all paths lead to Rome, so these writers, particularly the beginners, were led to *Thirty Days*. No wonder there is still a saying among them:

'Old Reginin picked us out
And blessed us with his dying breath.'

His whole way of working (his 'style' as they say now) was alive and quick, and free from red tape.

He would take a manuscript, look it over quickly, say with a casual, almost bored expression, 'Right, make out a receipt for three hundred roubles', pull out the drawer of his desk and count the roubles out. Then he would sigh, as after a hard job well done, and begin one of the conversations for which he was famous – news, anecdotes, recollections, literary sketches, jokes and epigrams.

He had had a long and interesting life, and his memory was sharp as a razor. He told endless stories but hardly ever wrote anything down, which is a great pity. His Memoirs would have been fascinating.

He died a few years ago, painfully but bravely. His courageous last days on earth were the epitome of his life, a restless, seething life devoted to journalism and to art, the life of a man who loved nothing in the world better than sensations, books, the theatre, the circus, and the friendship of gifted men.

That was how I remember him in Odessa, and I found him unchanged in Moscow, after many years of work on *The Seaman*: lean, elegant, with the face of Adolphe Menjou, quick movements, a quick patter, and sharp yet weary eyes.

II

The Stolen Speech

One evening in mid-April, when the sky beyond the office window was turning green and the Vorontsov lighthouse blinking red, Izya came quietly into my room. He softly shut the heavy door (carved with bunches of grapes and garlands of roses), tiptoed to the desk, and pressed his finger to his lips.

He was panting with excitement.

As the office was empty – everyone had gone home except Bartholomew the Abyssinian – I thought Izya's antics unnecessary.

'All right. What is it?' I asked in a loud voice.

He rolled his eyes, squeezed my shoulder and whispered under his breath:

'Quiet: listen.'

He told me – drawing back to look at me triumphantly and searchingly – that he had just been to the Provincial Committee's press and there he had seen. . . .

He choked, broke off, clumsily rolled a cigarette, lit it, took a deep pull and told me what he had seen.

He had seen the text of Lenin's speech on the New Economic Policy.[16] Lenin had recently made it in Moscow. It had been set up as a pamphlet but not yet printed. The text was preceded by a note on the front page to the effect that this was a confidential document with a restricted circulation – i.e. for initiates only.

There had been vague rumours about the speech for the past three days, but no hard news. All we had heard at the office was that a speech had been made and, of course, published throughout

the Russian Federation. But in Odessa, for some reason, it was being kept from the public.

We were sure that this was a decision of the Provincial Committee. Evidently they disagreed with Lenin's basic propositions. We heard later that we had been right.

On the other hand, it was difficult in those days for people like Ivanov, Izya and myself, who were not in the party, to have a clear view of what was happening. We knew nothing for certain. We were only angry that Lenin's words were being kept from the people. We thought it a crime. We simply had to get hold of that text and publish it, whatever the cost.

We had tried but failed. At the Provincial Committee, we were told with a grin that it was none of our business and we shouldn't be too nosey. But now Izya had caught sight of the speech by accident. The forme was in the glassed-off office of the manager of the press, and the manager had gone out for a minute. Izya had not been able to read the whole text; there were no pulls lying about, and he couldn't very well hang around indefinitely. He had only dropped in to see the manager about a stereo for the *The Seaman*. Naturally, he showed no sign of having seen the forme, and went away at once.

'We must either publish that speech,' said Izya, 'or admit that we are cowards and nitwits. I don't want to be either a coward or a nitwit. Nor do you. So listen to my brilliant plan. Sukhodolsky works three days for us, and three days for the Provincial Committee. We must get him to hand over the forme to us for two or three hours at night. That will give us time to take it to our press, print the speech as a supplement to *The Seaman,* wash the ink off and bring it back. Let's go and see Ivanov. He's the only one who can persuade Sukhodolsky.'

We went at once. Ivanov lived a long way off, near French Boulevard. Hearing about the speech he turned white and began to stammer. This was always a sign that he was terribly excited.

We went with him to the old sandstone house where Sukhodolsky lived. Izya and I waited at the gate. The hands of my watch seemed to have been smeared with glue. The seconds hardly moved.

Time dragged and our cause seemed lost. Sukhodolsky would never take the risk. Izya kicked the wall hard in frustration.

At last Ivanov came out with Sukhodolsky. Sukhodolsky was beaming. 'Clever lads!' he whispered mysteriously. This was his highest expression of delight.

It turned out that Sukhodolsky's father-in-law was night watchman at the Provincial Committee's press – 'a pearl of a man!' Sukhodolsky said.

Sukhodolsky willingly took charge of the operation. Everything went swiftly and silently. With Sukhodolsky's and the watchman's help, we brought out the heavy lead forme, put it in a cab and drove to our own press. There, Ivanov had everything ready – paper from the store and trusty compositors he had asked to stay behind. (The current issue of *The Seaman* was nearly printed, so they would normally have gone home.)

We held a council and decided to print the speech as a special supplement. The pages of the pamphlet were wider than our columns; only four would fit into our page instead of six, leaving a wide blank at the side. But there was no time to fuss. The forme was placed in the machine. Sukhodolsky made up the headings. The tea-wrappers rustled and the machine hummed, printing the historic speech.

We read it avidly by the light of a kitchen oil-lamp. History was being made here beside us, in the dim press room, and we had our small part in making it.

The supplement printed, we carefully washed off the ink, carried the forme to the cab, and Izya and I took it back to the Provincial Committee press and put it back exactly where we had found it.

No one saw us except the silent watchman. We left no trace.

We were too excited to go home – it would be light in an hour anyway – so we went to the office.

Bartholomew opened the door, welcomed us and put on the kettle.

We sat on stacks of wrappers and drank tea. Aurora showed up in her dusty pink cloak.

We were all proud that in the morning Lenin's speech would be

known to the whole of Odessa. We were not worrying about the consequences of our daring, though we knew they could be serious. Only Sukhodolsky shook his head and said it might be a good thing to disappear from Odessa for a while.

And that morning, the 16th of April 1921, the news-vendors of Odessa, soured, sceptical, sclerotic old men, shuffled off in their wooden clogs, shouting hoarsely:

'*Seaman*! Comrade Lenin's speech! Exclusive. You won't get it anywhere else. *Seaman*!'

The Seaman sold out within minutes.

Odessa hummed like a hornets' nest.

We expected trouble and were prepared for it. But none ensued unless you count my meeting with the Provincial Committee Secretary in Greek Street.

Purple in the face, he was rushing headlong, brandishing a copy of *The Seaman*. He pulled up short in front of me and shouted:

'Thieves! Our forme! . . . Gutter press tactics! . . . You'll answer for it. You've gone too far!'

'Not at all,' I said innocently. We hadn't stolen anything. Where was the proof?

He choked. 'You want proof, do you!' He pulled out the supplement. 'There you are. Every misprint is ours. And the wide column – that's ours too. There's your proof!'

He stuffed the paper into his briefcase and vanished amidst the dying acacia blossom.

Whether we had learned to be ready for the unexpected or were young enough to have kept a remnant of childish exuberance, we felt nothing but pride in our exploit.

It raised us in our own eyes, though we didn't talk about it.

We were no longer just reporters. The sense of being citizens, of taking part in the life of the country, filled us with joy.

12

The Alleged Death of the Artist Kostandi

Chekhov was terrified of Odessa reporters. He hated talking about his unfinished work anyway, and always added:

'For God's sake don't tell an Odessa reporter.'

Some of those who had so frightened him were still among us. They were the last surviving 'kings of scoops'. The *Odessa Post* was their home, and its editor, Finkel, their patron.

The paper carried almost nothing but detailed reports of thefts, robberies, confidence tricks, bandit raids and murders.

The style of the articles was incredible. I remember a leader on some trifling decision of the Town Council, in which Finkel wrote: 'For joy at this decision, we should paint our Odessa sky pink and applaud the Town Council from the roof-tops.'

The older journalists told us youngsters that Finkel's name was indeed a legend but only because of his abysmal ignorance.

Only one of the reporters who had terrified Chekhov had attached himself to *The Seaman*. Lyova Krupnik was a man of deceptive appearance. A mild looking old gentleman with a honeyed voice and gold pince-nez, he went about in a patched tussore jacket, exhaling an Ancien Régime aroma of triple eau-de-cologne.

But, in spite of this innocent air, Lyova was as dangerous as a bomb primed with mustard gas. Ivanov had warned me, but I disbelieved him until an unusual incident took place.

In summer, I used to go to the office very early. I liked walking slowly from my Black Sea Street, choosing any one of the four possible ways. They all led to the Boulevard and the Vorontsov Palace.

There, the nasturtium blazed like fire, clinging to old pillars, and the wind from the port breathed – breathed, not blew – fresh, salty, and filling the street with a smell of newly-scrubbed decks.

I sat down on the low wall overlooking the harbour, and closed my eyes the better to feel the breath of the wind on my face. Apart from decks, it smelt of acacias, dry seaweed, the camomile in the cracks of the sea wall, and of tar and rust. Occasionally, all these smells were washed away by a special after-storm smell from the open sea. It was quite unlike, and could not be mistaken for anything else. It was as though a girl's arm, cool from bathing, were brushing my cheek.

I sat on the wall, losing count of time, inwardly absorbed in the contemplation of the shimmering horizon of Golconda. I wanted to believe – and I believed – that this flowering land existed somewhere on earth. At times, it seemed to be sailing towards me, ever nearer and more luminous, driving before it the waves of wind, the currents of soft air.

After dozing for a little on my bench, I went on to the office. Bartholomew, our Abyssinian barber, opened the door.

He slept in the once luxurious drawing-room with its flaking frescoes on the walls. They showed the Goddess Aurora, in her transparent pink cloak, flying amidst beige clouds and strewing the earth with crimson flowers and acanthus leaves from a horn of plenty.

It always touched me that the simple artist had painted as a background the Odessa watersteps and monument to Richelieu, enveloped in a blue mist from the sea.

My room was still fresh from the night air. I sat down at my desk and managed to get through some writing 'for myself' before Lucienna turned up (she always came in later than I did). I was thankful for these quiet hours in the empty office.

Then the contributors arrived and piled my desk high with long strips of paper covered with writing. All day long I corrected articles, despatches and news-items. I worked until I was ready to drop and my arm was stiff and aching. I had to rewrite about half the news-items, to rid them of their irrepressible Moldavian-Odessa style.

In the end I came to enjoy sub-editing and correcting. It helped me with the revision of my own work.

I was assistant editor and therefore general dog's body. I did everything from editing to allocating the reporters' jobs, and from interviewing authors to settling the blazing rows between old and young reporters.

After all that, Izya and I spent the evening making-up the next day's issue.

One morning I arrived very early and found Lyova Krupnik in my office. He sat on the windowsill, crying and wiping his eyes on a spotted handkerchief. His pince-nez swung at the end of its black cord in time to his sobs.

I asked what was wrong. He waved me away as though my question had been out of place and indiscreet. Apparently his sorrow was so great that he was beyond answering questions.

I offered him a glass of water. He drank it with his tears and said brokenly:

'Lying on a table. . . . Covered with a sheet. . . . And we were at school together. . . . We shared a desk for eight years. . . . We were penniless together in Arnautov Street, and now. . . .'

He gave another sob, blew his nose and looked up with swollen, red-rimmed eyes, asking for sympathy.

'Have you lost a relative?' I asked diffidently.

'Oh no. I've got none, thank goodness.'

'Who then?'

'Kostandi, the artist,' he cried in a tone implying I was an idiot to ask. 'The leader of the South-Russian school,' he said more quietly. 'A master! Brilliant! And a heart of gold. The kindest man in the world.'

He was so miserable that I began to feel genuinely sorry for

him. I couldn't think of what to do to comfort him. At last I had an inspiration and said:

'Pull yourself together now, and sit down and write an obituary. For tomorrow's paper.'

Lyova caught his pince-nez, put it on crooked, got off the windowsill, dusted his trousers and said querulously:

'You might at least give me some paper. What am I to write on? There's never a quarter of a sheet for a cigarette in this office.'

I gave him some old galleys but he sniffed and said they might be all right for the sort of news and articles we published but not for a great artist's obituary. It was positively indecent and insulting to his memory.

He was being difficult, but I thought he was upset and gave him a few sheets of good paper – it was worth its weight in gold in our office.

He went off to the next room, and spent a long time blowing his nose, sighing and scratching with his pen.

Lucienna came in, heard that Kostandi had died and said:

'That dear old man! Why does it always have to be people like him, and not bastards like Kinti and all the other twerps who only know how to swindle people!'

'Oh, dear!' said Lyova. 'I wish you wouldn't use such coarse language, Lucienna Kazimirovna. It breaks my heart to hear you.'

'Fancy that, you poor shrinking violet,' Lucienna replied. 'Don't you pretend you're so cut up, I won't believe you.'

Lyova dictated the obituary, and he and Lucienna quarrelled because he insisted on two carbon copies and Lucienna swore she had only one decent carbon left. In the end, he got his way and left, apparently taking his carbon copy as a souvenir.

I read the obituary, corrected it (where Lyova said Kostandi was as great as Raphael) and sent it to the printer.

Thinking of Lyova going home so wretched, I said to Lucienna:

'You really shouldn't persecute that poor defenceless old man.'

'Who's wretched and defenceless? Krupnik? You wait, one of these days he'll play you such a dirty trick, you'll curse the day

you were born. All you Moscovites are the same, you're too sentimental.'

Just then our proof reader came in, Kolya Hadzhayev, a young student from Novorossisk University, and a great connoisseur of art and poetry.

His judgments were brief, harsh and without appeal. No one dared argue with him because none of us had his erudition.

He despised all who differed from him, regarded them as 'trashy little people', rather like a species of cockroach, and never spoke of them without making a face as though he were going to be sick.

Of all Odessa poets, he tolerated only Bagritsky; he spoke condescendingly of Narbut, and considered George Shengeli decadent as a poet and because he went about in a topee.

'Have you heard?' Lucienna asked him. 'Kostandi, the artist, has died.'

'He's no artist, he's a pig-breeder, your Kostandi,' Kolya, black with anger, shouted unexpectedly in reply. 'How can you so belittle the word "artist"! All his life he held on to the apron-strings of the Itinerants.[17] Don't talk to me about him!'

The reporters were beginning to arrive. Arenberg, thick-set and with a cheerful face, came in. Every piece of news, from the arrival of the Norwegian steamer, *Camilla Gilbert*, to an earthquake in Arabia, filled him with uproarious joy. It was the course of life itself that delighted him, its gossip, the details of its movement, all its changes – whether the result was good or bad was also important but of secondary interest.

Hearing of Kostandi's death, Arenberg commented that of course Kostandi was no Repin.[18] This produced another outburst from Kolya, not against Kostandi, but this time against Repin.

'That old crank who stuffed himself with hay!' he said, and went off without a glance at anyone, despising us all.

Repin had had certain mild eccentricities, among them his belief in the medicinal properties of soup made from fresh hay. This angered Kolya more than anything else.

Then Ivanov came in with Lowengard, a tall, grey-haired reporter with a Don Quixote beard and a cane like a short lance.

Having spent his life covering the Odessa port, which he knew like the back of his hand, he said he could not express an opinion about Kostandi, the artist, as he had never heard of him, but of course he had known Kostandi, the captain of the steamer *Toiler of the Sea*. . . .

He was interrupted and went to sit in a corner, immersed in his thoughts, eyes closed and hands crossed on his stick. That was how he usually sat.

Even when I was not on duty, I often went to the press in the evening to check the make-up of the paper, have a chat with Izya or Sukhodolsky and, in general, for a breath of the press-room air.

Working at *The Seaman,* I became addicted to typography. Even the smells of printer's ink and lead were 'sweet and pleasant' to me. I came to like the compositors, their jokes, their background of wide though random knowledge, their ruthless judgments, and even the way they swayed back and forth in front of the type-case, like Moslems at their prayers or reading the Koran.

The dark, dusty, low-ceilinged room, the damp galleys, humming machines, stacks of coloured tea-wrappers and rolls of paper, the traditional savage fights with the proof readers, the tea cooling on the windowsill, the geranium in the window, the smell of its rough leaves – everything had a romantic glamour for me, I suppose because it was here that papers, books, maps, posters, calendars and shipping schedules started their life.

I don't think I'll ever forget the rough deal table, sticky and black with ink, under the open window. Beyond it and the rusty grating, the leaves of the chestnuts drooped in the heat. I remember the purple sheen of the asphalt outside, and the damp proof of a poem by some unknown poet:

August sunset. A taut breeze
And the breath of distant fields.
And snow-white clouds rising,
Almost blue, over the sea.

The galley had 'grief' instead of 'sea' ('*gorye*' for '*morye*'), and the proof reader had made a note in thick blue pencil in the margin. It occurred to me that the compositor hadn't done so

badly. Why shouldn't clouds rise over human grief, as emblems of halcyon beauty to distract and heal the heart?

But that night the press-room was in an uproar. Even from the street I could hear Izya's indignant voice and the guffaws of the printers.

The moment I came in, Izya rushed at me, waving the proofs of Kostandi's obituary, still damp from the press.

'Who produced this horrible thing?' he yelled, white as a sheet with rage.

'Krupnik.'

'I knew it, the bastard!'

'Why? What's the matter?'

'Oh, nothing much.' He grinned ferociously. 'Just a fascinating little incident. May a windlass knock his brains out, that King of Reporters. Only that I was coming here to make up the paper and, two doors away, whom did I see but Kostandi risen from the dead! I even walked with him as far as Catherine Street, and he told me about his picture exhibition next month! And he took my hand in his manly grip, and I actually noticed a smear of blue oil paint on his tussore jacket. And he didn't look like a corpse, let me tell you.'

'But what does it all mean?'

'It means that all Krupnik told you was a pack of lies. He wanted five thousand roubles, so he sold you a pup. You'll say it's crazy, *The Seaman* can sack him. So it can, but Finkel never sacked anybody in his life, so he thinks he can get away with anything here as well. He's a born liar and nothing will change him as long as he lives. It's the only thing he'll never let you down on.'

'I'd like to squash him flat, that louse,' said Sukhodolsky. 'I can't bear to look at him. I break out in a sweat whenever I do. It's that lying voice that turns me up.'

We cut out the obituary. Next morning, it was not in *The Seaman* but the identical text, down to the last comma, appeared in the *Odessa News*.

Arenberg rushed in, beaming with the sensation in journalistic circles, and told us that Krupnik had gone straight from *The*

Seaman to the *News*, and palmed off the obituary with the same crocodile tears as he had shed in our office.

The *News* offered its deepest apologies to Kostandi, and *The Seaman* printed a poem by Yadov:

If in your paper you have read
That you are dead, you must be brave.
If that is what the press has said
Be quick and nip into your grave.

Krupnik vanished. Ivanov, furious, ordered him to be brought in, dead or alive. But he was nowhere to be found. He had not spent the night at home.

A fortnight went by. One day, I arrived at the office very early as usual, walked into my room and stopped dead. There, on the dirty windowsill sat Lyova Krupnik, crying his eyes out. His pince-nez dangled on its black cord and swung to his shuddering gasps.

'I'm so sorry,' he said brokenly. 'There was a slight mistake.'

'A mistake?' I asked, my hands growing cold.

'Yes,' he nodded meekly. 'A mistake made in good faith. It appears that the man who died wasn't the artist Kostandi, but Kostandi the shoe-black. It was the same surname and the same address; the shoe-black lived in the basement. You can see how the confusion arose.'

'Just a minute.' I pulled myself together. 'Didn't you see him with your own eyes, lying on a table under a sheet?'

'That's just the point.' Lyova blew his nose. 'It was in the basement, it was dark, and there was the sheet as well. Incidentally, I'll be doing a piece for you on Kostandi's exhibition. It's coming soon.'

'Posthumously, I suppose.'

'That's a nasty crack,' Lyova said reproachfully. 'In fact it's in very poor taste.'

'Look here,' I said. 'Go away will you? You've got nothing more to do with this paper!'

'Fancy that!' he replied cantankerously and got up. 'Call it a paper! A cheap rag! I was the Odessa correspondent of the *Figaro*, so you needn't throw your fish-wrapper in my face.'

I had no time to answer. The door flew open. On the threshold stood Ivanov, livid with rage.

'Out!' he shouted in a clear, metallic voice. 'Get out at once!'

Lyova Krupnik jumped and trotted to the door, clutching his pince-nez.

We heard him spit angrily on the floor of Aurora's drawing-room, and his clogs drum on the pavement as he left *The Seaman* for ever.

The last of the reporters whom Chekhov had rightly dreaded had gone from our lives.

13

What do you want, Young Man?

The heroic style is well nigh forgotten: modern life demands simple expression.

Yet how describe the indescribable – the Odessa market known in the twenties as the New Bazaar?

How make it come to life for readers unused to rhetoric? How depict yesterday's typhus patients milling round red-hot frying pans of garlic and sliced Ukrainian home-made sausage – the first offering of the NEP[19] – writhing and crackling in its own fat?

How convey the noise of swearing, howling, whining, shouting, curses and hysterics, all merging into one continuous roar and suddenly cut off by the piercing sound of a policeman's whistle? Or the stampede of the black marketeers, festooned with their belongings, over the wooden pavements shaking to their tread? Or the trail of yellowing bust-bodices, soldiers' cotton underpants, and cracked, liver-coloured, rubber hot water bottles left in their wake?

Since rhetoric is out, I will have to do with every-day words.

There were certain unwritten rules you had to know before it was any use your going to the market.

The first was never to show interest in any of the goods, and preferably to look bored as you elbowed your way through the crowd. Because at the smallest sign of your looking for something to buy, dozens of people would clutch your arm, your shirt, or even your coat belt from behind, and shout with desperate voices and tragic eyes:

'What do you want to buy, young man?'

No one asked you what you wished to sell, because the answer was obvious: what a man wanted to sell, he carried on his arm or round his neck. If he had nothing on display but his eyes darted in search of a customer, all the regulars knew at once that he was selling fake jewellery and called after him:

'What crown jewels have you pinched today?'

Only very exceptionally was it impossible to tell at a glance what a man was dealing in.

This was the case of the French sailor, nicknamed Lyova. He had jumped his ship and stayed on in Odessa, convinced that, in those fabulous days of civil war and the collapse of international order, no one would report him as a deserter to the French government.

Short, unshaven, sullen, with a hooked nose and fierce, scornful eyes, a beret with a red pom-pon on his head and a torn purple muffler round his neck, he would race silently along Deribasov Street, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his dirty blue greatcoat, and suddenly shout in a piercing falsetto which could be heard streets away:

'The best! The strongest! The most lasting!'

He never said what he had to sell. His flight was like a whirlwind. The crowd weaved round him and pressed back against the walls. Some out-of-town visitor would ask: 'What's he selling?' But the Odessans only grinned and shrugged. Small boys hooted after him. A policeman came hurrying from the nearest post, whistle in hand.

Only when he saw the policeman, would the sailor cry his wares:

'Very best flints! For lighters! The longest! For lighters!'

With this triumphant cry, he vanished into the far end of Sadovaya where the New Bazaar smouldered in the fumes of vegetable oil – a refuge for speculators, pick-pockets, and once-rich old ladies.

He was a very statuesque figure, that sailor, modelled in terra cotta and painted in bright colours.

Another rule was always to accept the first price you were bid.

Neglect of this unwritten law could end in disaster, as happened to me.

Vasya Reginin's wife, a graceful, fragile and unpractical young woman, fell sick.

In addition to a wife, Vasya had a little girl of six, named Kira.

Sick with worry himself, he dashed about the town, trying to get hold of a little money, and some remedy unattainable at that time (mustard plaster, I think). He begged me with tears in his eyes to flog the expensive wadded interlining of his coat in the market.

The wadding was thick, and light as down. I thought it must be worth a fortune.

Why he picked on me, I don't know. He said I was clever at knowing my way about, and he was useless at this sort of thing. I fell for his flattery, collected the wadding from his flat, rolled it up and went to the Bazaar. It was foolish, but I had no idea of where I was going – I strolled along Sadovaya, not suspecting that it was the road leading straight to hell.

At first, no one would even look at the wadding. They behaved as though they had never heard of such a thing. 'What's that?' they asked. 'Stuffing for a divan? Or a shawl for a premature baby?'

I was annoyed, but kept my temper, even when cheeky women pulled out tufts, divided them into strands and, for some reason, smelled them.

At last, a kind old man with an inch-tape round his neck (presumably a tailor) offered me a hundred thousand. But I had made up my mind to sell for no less than two and get Reginin out of all his troubles.

'Are you crazy?' said the tailor. 'Take it and don't play Baron Nobel. You're lucky to have come to an honest man.'

I refused. He shuffled about, then spat and went off, crying:

'Breeches! Made while the customer waits, from his own material, in two hours! Fit like gloves! We give them away! Three thousand roubles without the trimming!'

The next offer came from a tipsy Greek and was for seventy thousand. Then a whining woman offered me fifty.

It was nearly four o'clock and the market was beginning to empty. The Greek reappeared with an offer of thirty-five thousand.

I told him to go to hell. Then a young man, barefoot and in an old Cossack cap, pushed a ten thousand note into my hand and tried to jerk the roll from under my arm, saying:

'Go on, take it and get back to your girl friend.'

I snatched the wadding back and threw the money at him.

'Oh, like that, is it, you bastard?' said the young man, reaching into his shirt-front.

At that moment, a woman in a hat with velvet pansies screamed. She was selling off the last of her potato pies, shrivelled and dry as string. In answer to her shout, a policeman blew his whistle. The young man strolled away with an independant air, the shoulder muscles rolling under his thin shirt.

'Go away quickly,' the woman said to me. 'He's got a knife under his shirt. I can't stand always seeing bloodshed in the Bazaar, and having to give evidence.'

It was getting dark. My day at the market had come to an inglorious end – or so, in my abysmal ignorance, I believed.

I left the Bazaar. As I was walking away, I suddenly remembered having seen the tipsy Greek, the whining woman, and the boy in the Cossack cap, all three together behind a stall, at the beginning of the market-day. Only then did it dawn on me that the same gang of 'Mavericks' had been working on me all day. 'Mavericks' were thieves who operated a ring in the market, and pilfered and robbed when they got a chance.

At the market gate I saw the Greek again. He was smoking a crumpled cigarette, and ignored me.

I walked on, and became aware of a disgusting, pungent smell following me. At the corner, a woman who was selling sunflower seeds called out:

'You're on fire, young man! You're smoking like a chimney!'

I looked round. Thick, white smoke poured from the wadding.

I unrolled it: a glowing, smouldering pattern was spreading over it.

I tried to stamp it out, but it wriggled like dozens of little fiery snakes, and only spread further. The only thing left was to kick the burning, smoking mess off the pavement.

'You must have got into bad trouble with the mavericks,' said the woman. 'So they set fire to your wadding out of spite. Must have lit it from behind, with a cigarette.'

I thought of the tipsy Greek at the gate. This was clearly his work.

A crowd had gathered round the smouldering heap. The woman told them my sad tale, indignantly shouting and gesticulating.

I went straight home. I was choking with disgust, anger and shame. I cursed those who thought there was any glamour about thieves and robbers. What rubbish! What a tale for trusting fools!

I swore a solemn oath never again to go to the Bazaar.

Next day, I had somehow to get hold of two hundred thousand roubles – the amount I had promised Reginin for his wadding. After racking my brains for a long time, I decided to go to Moser. He was reputed among us to be a man of substance.

The Mosers were full of sympathy and indignation; they gave me tea and two large sheets of money (a hundred thousand roubles each). I rolled them up and went to Reginin's. Never in my life before had I felt so cheerful as I did that morning.

The third rule of the Bazaar (as illustrated by this incident) was never to carry anything on your back – for the obvious reason that it could be slashed with a razor or set on fire and, later, bought for nothing as damaged goods.

In spite of my oath, I could not keep away from the market for ever. Almost the only goods in the State shops were calico, some wadded jackets, and hats with ear-flaps.

The hats, made of artificial fur, were for some reason delivered pressed into huge bales. No one unpacked the bales, and they lay about in the shops, smelling of decay.

I was always having to go to the market, if only for my fishing rods and hooks.

Every time, I came away crushed and humiliated by the sight of shameless greed, helpless poverty, trampled human dignity, bestial coarseness, and trickery and deceit.

The swindlers were legion – petty, shifty-eyed and impudent.

Gamblers played, cheated and fought, hiding behind the stalls. Caught in the act, cardsharpers howled, smeared blood over their faces and swore such refinements of vengeance that your blood ran cold.

Newspapers were tied to the rags of wandering madmen and set on fire.

A dense crowd would collect in some secluded corner of the market. Eyes glittering with curiosity, passers-by would join, and push silently forward, closer to the centre, where you could hear the sound of dull blows and muffled groans. A thief was being savagely beaten, or a woman, suspected of pilfering, searched and stripped naked to the delighted guffaws of dishevelled market women from out of town.

Occasionally, the thief tore himself free and, grimacing, battered and bruised black and blue all over, broke into the parady of some obscene dance; or the naked woman and the one she had robbed clutched each other's hair and, together, rolled over and over in the dust.

Never before had I seen such a concentration of malice and depravity in any one place. It was all the more astonishing and sad, because the warm, sparkling sea, the humming city, the blossoming acacias, the walls touched with gold by the sun, were so very near. Despite the famine, there were many laughing people in the streets, the air smelt of flowers and, low over the sea, the stars twinkled like light-buoys.

Still, there were some good people even in the Bazaar. They were all cranks, people with broken, empty lives, but here their goodness shone like a beacon.

I remember an old man, half blind, who sold photos for stereoscopic viewers. He was always surrounded by children. All day,

he would show them views of Paris and Rome, Moscow and the Island of Madeira for nothing. It was hard to see how he made his living, for in those days, no one except Izya Livshitz went in for stereoscopic photographs, and even Izya bought them only out of pity.

The old man kept a dusty globe with faded colours standing on the pavement beside him. For fifty roubles you could spin it and look at fascinating places like Easter Island, or the Zambesi River, or the city of Caracas.

A little further on there was a graphologist-fortune-teller. He told fortunes from hand-writing. All day long he sat on a bench and examined envelopes and letters through a huge magnifying glass.

He was always scolding his clients, and even shouting at them. But they were devoted to him all the same, especially the women.

'Haven't I told you three times running, citizeness – you must leave that man you're living with, or you'll land in jail with him.'

'I suppose I ought to, really,' the woman agreed vaguely.

'Do leave him, Vera,' her friends urged her. 'You can see this man is saying it for your good.'

'Am I a social parasite or some such scum,' the fortune-teller grumbled, 'to extort money from you at the rate of three hundred roubles a time, all because of your havering. If you don't want to do as I tell you, don't come to me. I'm not going to tell your fortune again, I've had enough.'

Another time, I heard him shouting:

'From the way you form your letters, you must think a lot of yourself, young man. You swagger about like some sort of a von Baron or von Dingdong. But a right attitude to life can be achieved only through study and patience, not through insolence and yapping. I've been watching you a long time – always about with that Vitka Ten-of-Spades, instead of doing an honest job and making your old parents happy.'

But the most endearing of all was old Zusman who sold caps in a little back-yard shop with a signboard. 'Warsaw Caps'.

He sat in his shop with his assistant, a dismal, sickly boy called

Milya. The boy slept and snored, while Zusman, his spectacles perched on the end of his nose, slowly read the newspaper, and sighed, glancing disapprovingly at his rare customers.

One day, I went to the shop with Yasha Lifshitz.

'What d'you want a new cap for?' Zusman asked Yasha crossly. 'The one you've got on is all right.'

'That's my own business,' Yasha replied, equally crossly.

'Oh, well, if you enjoy chucking your money away on caps! Milya, show the comrade a cap. I've got to see a neighbour.'

With that, he went off. Snorting with annoyance, Yasha tried on several caps. Milya held the mirror for him, and nearly went to sleep and dropped it.

Yasha could not make up his mind. He put on a brown cap, and asked me if it suited him.

Before I could answer, Zusman returned, glanced at him, and asked Milya:

'Where's that customer who dropped in just now?'

'That's him,' said Milya wearily, pointing at Yasha.

'It can't be!' Zusman drew back, clasped his hands, and broke into a happy smile. 'I don't believe it! You're making it up. The one I see is a real lord in a Scottish cap. A proper Lord Chamberlain – and that one was very shabby, more like a tramp, if you'll forgive my saying so.'

'It's him all right,' Milya insisted glumly. 'He's just got a different cap on.'

'Ai-ai-ai!' cried Zusman. 'See how a cheap, hundred-rouble cap can change a man! If it's made by a proper craftsman, of course. It's miraculous, what it can do!'

Yasha couldn't help laughing, and Zusman, delighted with his trick, laughed until he cried and gave him a friendy slap on the shoulder.

'We have to be artists in our trade,' he said, still laughing. 'Honestly, I'd have made a good comedian! Come and have a chat one day. I could die of boredom in this empty shop. I'll make you such a cap for the summer as even Lloyd George never had in his life, nor ever will. The only snag is getting hold of the material.'

Everyone was happy, and Milya back on his stool behind the counter, nodding and snorting.

'How would you like to have that to talk to all day?' Zusman sighed. 'Honestly, it's enough to drive you mad and send you to your grave.'

'What do you want, young man?' I was asked at the Bazaar. All I really wanted was to see this heap of misery and filth burnt and scattered to the winds. And so it was in the end.

Reginin, incidentally, never doubted that I had sold his wadding for two hundred thousand roubles. Only twenty years later did the truth come out in Moscow, and Reginin, shaking with his usual silent laughter, gave me the two hundred thousand back, in the form of two ten-rouble notes of the 1939 issue.

14
I Promise you Maupassant

The Seaman printed a short story called 'The King'. It was signed I. Babel.[20]

It was the story of an Odessa bandit chief, Benzion ('Benny') the Scream, who married off his ageing sister Dvoira to an ailing, whining thief. The thief married her out of terror of Benny.

This was one of the first of Babel's 'Moldavanka' stories.

Moldavanka was a district near the goods station, with a population of two thousand bandits and thieves.

He had moved into the district to study its ways. He stayed with an old Jew, Tsires, who was being scolded into his grave by his shrewish wife, 'Aunt Khava'.

Soon after renting a room from this meek old man, who looked like a Liliputian, events were to develop at breakneck speed and Babel had to flee for his life from the flat with its overpowering smell of fried onions and moth-balls.

But more of this later.

'The King' was written in a precise, terse language. Its freshness hit you in the face like a splash from a syphon.

Ever since my schooldays the work of certain writers had seemed to me a form of magic. When I read 'The King' I realised that a new magician had joined their ranks, and that nothing he wrote could ever be limp or colourless.

'The King' dealt with a world completely outside our experience. The characters, their motives, their circumstances and their vivid, forceful talk – all were strange to us. The story had

the vitality of a grotesque. The smallest detail showed the sharpness of the author's vision. And suddenly, like a burst of sunshine through the window, you came upon some exquisite fragment, or the unexpected rhythm of a sentence balanced like a translation from the French, measured and rich.

This was new, exciting prose. It had the tone of voice of a man still covered with the dust of the Cavalry Corps campaigns,[21] but who could draw on all the riches of the culture of the past – from Bocaccio to Leconte de Lisle and from Vermeer of Delft to Alexander Blok.

Izya Livshitz brought Babel to *The Seaman*'s office. Never had I seen anyone look less like an author. Stooping, almost neckless because of his hereditary asthma, with a duck's bill of a nose, a creased forehead and an oily glint in his little eyes, he was anything but fascinating. At first sight you would have taken him for a commercial traveller or a stockbroker. But this, of course, was only until he opened his mouth.

At his very first words everything changed. His voice had an undertone of insistent irony.

Many people couldn't bear to meet his eyes; they drilled through you. Babel was a born unveiler of truth. He enjoyed cornering people, and was known in Odessa as an awkward, dangerous man.

He arrived at the office with a book of Kipling stories under his arm.

Talking to the editor, Ivanov, he put it down on the desk but kept looking at it with greedy impatience. He fidgeted in his chair, got up and sat down, obviously on edge. He wanted to read, not to make polite conversation.

He soon changed the subject to Kipling, saying that everyone ought to write his kind of steely prose, and to visualise in the clearest detail what he was about to write. A story should be as accurate as a military report or a bank cheque. Even the handwriting should be firm and clear, as on a cheque or an army order – which Kipling's, incidentally, was.

He finished on an unexpected note. He took off his spectacles, and this at once gave him a benign and helpless air.

'We Odessans,' he said with a hint of mockery, 'will never have our Kipling. We are peaceful hedonists. But we will certainly have our Maupassants – because we have plenty of sea and sun, and pretty women, and plenty to think about. That much I can promise you.'

He went on to tell us of his visit to Maupassant's last flat in Paris – the sun-warmed frilly pink lampshades, like the underclothes of expensive courtesans, the smell of brilliantine and coffee, and the vast rooms which frightened the sick author, who for years had schooled himself in the tight framework of his plots and the shortest way of telling a story.

Babel recalled with delight the Paris he had known. He had an excellent French accent.

From some of his comments and questions, I realised that Babel was a man of incredible persistence, tenacious as a leech, wanting to know everything and never squeamish about the truth, a man outwardly sceptical to the point of cynicism but who, in fact, believed in the simple goodness of the human soul. He was fond of quoting the Bible: 'Strength makes thirsty; sorrow slakes the heart.'

I watched him from my window as he walked away along the shady side of Marine Boulevard. He walked slowly, for no sooner had he left the building than he opened his book and began to read. At times, he stopped to let someone pass, but not once did he look up.

People went by and glanced back puzzled, but no one spoke to him.

Soon he disappeared in the shadow of the plane trees, their velvet leaves fluttering in the stream of Black Sea air.

After that, I often met Babel in town. He was never alone. Swarming round him like midges were the 'Odessa literary boys'. They caught his jokes in mid-air, flew round the town with them, and ran his countless errands without complaining.

He told them off for carelessness, and drove them away ruthlessly when he had had enough of them. But the rougher he treated them, the better they seemed to like it.

Nor were they alone in their hero-worship of Babel. Old, established authors (there were several in Odessa at that time) treated him with as much respect as did the young local writers and poets.

The reason was not only that he had exceptional gifts – it was also that Gorky liked and appreciated him as a writer, that he was just back from Budenny's campaigns and shared in their legend, and above all, that he was our first authentic Soviet writer.

It has to be remembered that Soviet literature at the time was scarcely born, and that not a single new book had reached us in Odessa except Blok's *The Twelve*[22] and a Russian translation of Barbusse's *The Fire*.

They produced a shattering impression on us – they already flashed with the distant lightning of new poetry and prose, and we learned Blok's poems and the austere prose of Barbusse by heart.

It was not till late summer 1921 that I got to know Babel really well. He was living at Ninth Station in Fountain. I was on holiday, and Izya and I rented a dilapidated villa not far from his.

One of our walls overhung a sheer cliff. Chunks of bright pink plaster often broke away and went skipping gaily down to the sea. So it was safer to sleep on the verandah facing the steppe.

Our garden stood waist high in grey weeds. Tiny poppies, the size of finger nails, struggled through them and looked like drops of fresh red paint.

We saw Babel often. Sometimes we spent nearly all day on the beach, fishing for bullheads and listening to Babel's leisurely stories.

He was a wonderful storyteller. Those he told were even more powerful and accomplished than those he wrote.

How can I describe that gay yet sad summer we spent at Fountain in 1921? It was made gay by our youth but sad by the vague anxiety continually in our hearts. And also, perhaps, because of the pitch-black southern nights. They dropped their curtain right in front of us, on the top step of the stone verandah.

You could stand on the verandah and stretch your hand into

the night and snatch it back, having felt the chill of cosmic space at your fingertips.

The gaiety was in the bright patchwork of our conversations, jokes and hoaxes (the Odessa word for them, 'roulette', soon spread to the rest of the country).

The sadness was unaccountably embodied for me in a clear light which shone on the horizon every night.

It was a star low over the sea. It watched us with friendly insistence night after night, yet none of us knew its name.

The sadness was also, for some reason, in the smell of the stone highway as it cooled in the evening, and in the light centres of the wild verbena growing outside our door, and in our strong sense of the quick passing of time.

The world was still beset by troubles. But for us youngsters they were already next-door to happiness, because the times were full of hope of a rational outcome, of an end to persistent misfortune, of the flowering bound to follow the seemingly endless winter.

That summer, I think I understood for the first time what is meant by the 'power of genius'.

Everything was made absorbingly interesting for us by Babel's presence. We lived in his reflected light.

The people I had met until then had rarely made a lasting impression on me. I forgot their faces, voices, their words, their way of walking. But now they etched themselves on my memory.

Babel often returned from Odessa by the evening horse-tram (it had replaced the electric tram, now forgotten). The tram went no further than Eighth Station, and you could hear it from a long way off, clanking all its loose bolts.

From there, Babel walked, and arrived dusty, tired, but pleased.

'You should have heard two old women talking in the tram! About eggs! Let me tell you. You'll laugh till you cry.'

He described the conversation, and we not only laughed until we sobbed, we rolled on the floor, helpless.

Then Babel would pull us each by the sleeve and ask in the querulous voice of the market woman we knew at Tenth Station:

'Have you gone completely barmy, young fellow? Or what?'

You had only to close your eyes when you listened to him, and there you were, sitting in the Odessa tram, looking at the passengers with as much insight as if you had been their bosom friend all your life. Perhaps they didn't really exist and Babel had made them up from scratch. But what did we care so long as we could see them in front of us, complete, living, earthy, grunting, coughing, winking at each other and nodding at Babel, who already was said in Odessa to be as clever as Gorky.

Long before the stories were published, Babel told us about old Guedalla who dreamed of an 'International of men of good will', and the incident with the salt at Fastov Station, and the furious cavalry charges, and Budenny's dazzling smile, and we heard from him some wonderful Cossack songs. There was one he liked particularly; we often sang it afterwards in Odessa and its poetry never ceased to astonish us. By now I have forgotten all but a couple of lines:

The star of the fields above my father's house,
And my mother's grieving hands . . .

It was that 'star of the fields' that got me every time. I even dreamed of it at night, a quiet, solitary star high up above the dark, familiar, barren fields.

Babel was a ready talker, and told us much about Gorky and the revolution, and how he, Babel, once took up unofficial residence in the Anichkov Palace in Petersburg, and slept on the divan in Alexander the Third's study, and took a peep in the desk, and found a box of cigarettes presented by the Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid. They were fat, pink cigarettes with an Arabic inscription in gold. With an air of great mystery, Babel handed us one each, and we smoked them that evening on our verandah. A delicate aroma drifted over Ninth Station, but we both got splitting headaches and, for a good hour, reeled like drunkards, clutching at the walls.

It was then I also heard from Babel the strange story of Tsires.

Babel stayed with Tsires and his sluggish, morose wife, Aunt

Khava, at the very centre of Moldavanka. He had decided to write several stories about this suburb of Odessa and its turbulent way of life. He felt drawn by the strangeness and originality of such undoubtedly gifted natures as the already legendary bandit Mike the Jap (Benny the Scream). He wanted to study them closer, and Tsires's dingy flat was the obvious look-out post.

It stood firm as a rock amidst the rampaging violence of the thieves' dens and the deceptive respectability of quiet homes, with crochet mats and silver candlesticks on the sideboard, where bandits sheltered under their parents' roof.

Surrounded by daring and well-armed young men, the flat was as safe as a fortress with an armed guard.

When Babel confided the purpose of his research work to Tsires, the old man was anything but pleased. In fact he was frankly worried.

'Oi, Monsieur Babel!' he said, shaking his head. 'And you, the son of such a well-known papa! And your mother a famous beauty in her time! Courted by Brodsky's own nephew, they say. Take my word for it, Moldavanka is no place for you, writer or no writer. Forget it. I'm telling you here and now, you won't have a pennyworth of success here, and you might collect a pocketful of trouble.'

'What kind of trouble?' Babel asked.

'Do I know?' Tsires replied evasively. 'How can I tell what crazy notion even a peaceful man like Five Roubles might get into his head – not to speak of Lyuska Chicken and the rest. Better not risk it, Monsieur Babel. Go home quietly to Catherine Street, to your papa. I tell you honestly, I'm sorry I ever let you that room. But how could I refuse such a pleasant spoken young man!'

Sometimes Babel spent the night in his room at Tsires's and heard Aunt Khava scolding the old man in whispers for letting a stranger into the house.

'What will you get out of it, you old miser? A wretched hundred thousand a month! And for that you'll lose your best clients! Lazar Broide will have a good laugh on you. They'll all go over to him, I swear by our late Idochka.'

'The cops are only waiting to jump on your Broide,' Tsires said uncertainly.

'Mind they don't jump on you first. He'll ruin you, that lodger. Nobody will give you one per cent. What will become of us in our old age?'

Tsires worried, tossing and turning in his bed.

So did Babel, trying to guess what Aunt Khava meant. He didn't like these mysterious conversations at night. He felt they hinted at some dangerous secret.

The nights were long in Moldavanka. A bleary light from a distant street-lamp fell on the peeling wallpaper. The walls smelt of acetic acid. At rare intervals the sound of brisk, businesslike footsteps came from the street, or a high-pitched whistle, or even a shot close-by, and a woman's hysterical laugh. It came from behind brick walls. The sobbing laughter seemed to be immured in them.

Rainy nights were particularly bad. Water tinkled in the drain-pipe. The bed creaked at the slightest movement, and all night long something nibbled at the rotting timbers behind the wall-paper.

Babel felt like going home to Catherine Street. There, behind thick walls, his room was peaceful, dark, safe, and the manuscript of his latest story, revised and re-written a dozen times, lay on the desk.

Babel would go up to it and stroke it gingerly like a half-tamed beast. He often got up at night and re-read three or four pages by the light of a wick-lamp, hemmed in by thick dictionaries standing on their side. Every time he found a few more unnecessary words and triumphantly crossed them out. 'Language is clear and powerful,' he used to say, 'not when there is nothing more to add to a sentence, but when there is nothing more you can cut out.'

All who saw Babel at work, especially at night (though few ever did, as he went into hiding when he wrote) were struck by the sadness of his face and its unusual expression of kindness and distress.

During those barren Moldavanka nights he would have given

much to go back to his manuscript. But, as a writer, he felt he was a soldier on reconnaissance, who must put up with any hardship in the way of duty: the loneliness, the stench of the extinguished oil-lamp which brought on his attacks of asthma, and the screams of tormented women from behind the walls of the houses.

One such night it suddenly dawned on him: obviously Tsires was a common 'crib-spotter', a scout for thieves, who tipped them off about the places they should raid. He got his 'cut' – his percentage of the proceeds. That was how he made his living. Babel was indeed an inconvenient lodger!

He could frighten away Tsires's reckless yet cautious clients. Who would want to take an extra risk because stingy old Tsires, tempted by an extra hundred thousand, had let a stranger into Moldavanka's very heart?

And the stranger had turned out to be a writer and therefore twice as dangerous as any ordinary card-sharper or pimp!

At last Babel understood Tsires's hints about 'a pocketful of trouble' and decided to move out in a few days. He needed these few more days to get Tsires to tell him all the interesting things he knew. For Babel was conscious of his powerful gift for squeezing people dry, gutting them with ruthless persistence or, as they said in Odessa, 'drawing their very souls out of them.'

But this time he failed. A bandit, Simon Lop-Ear, beat him to it, and there was nothing metaphorical about the way he parted Tsires from his soul.

One day when Babel had gone to town, Tsires, at home in his flat, was stabbed to death with a Finnish dagger.

Babel returned to find the police in the house and the head of the criminal investigation department in his room. He sat at Babel's desk, writing his report. A polite young man in dark-blue riding breeches and top boots, he dreamed of becoming a writer and therefore treated Babel with respect.

'I must ask you to take your things and leave this house at once,' he said. 'Or I can't be responsible for your safety even for the next twenty-four hours. You know Moldavanka!'

So Babel fled, shuddering, pursued by Aunt Khava's wails and

the curses she called down upon Simon Lop-Ear and all others whom she believed to be connected with the murder.

They were terrible curses. The polite policeman advised Babel:

'Don't listen to her ravings. She was in her right mind this morning and was able to give evidence. But now she's gone quiet mad. The ambulance from the asylum is coming for her in a moment.'

Beyond the partition, Aunt Khava steadily tore her hair, flung away the tufts, and screamed, sobbing and swaying to and fro:

'May you, Simon, get drunk on vodka with rat poison and die in your vomit! And may you kick your own mother Miriam, the old witch, for giving birth to such a fiend of hell! May all the Moldavanka boys sharpen their pen-knives and cut you into pieces during twenty days and twenty nights! May you, Simon, burn and burst in your own sizzling fat!'

Soon Babel learned everything there was to know about Tsires's death.

'Everything' was the fact that he had brought his fate upon himself. So not a living soul in Moldavanka pitied him, except Aunt Khava. He had proved to be dishonourable, and after that nothing in the world could save him from death.

This is what actually happened. The day before his death, Tsires called on Simon Lop-Ear.

Simon was shaving in the hall, in front of a magnificent cheval-glass in an ornate black frame.

He squinted at Tsires and said:

'Mixed yourself up with a nark, have you, Monsieur Tsires? Well, you know the new Soviet law – if you call on a man when he's shaving, state your business and buzz off. You're allowed twelve words, like at the central telegraph office. Any more, and your cut goes down by two hundred thousand a word.'

'Were you born with that unfortunate sense of humour?' Tsires asked with a sugary smile, 'or has it grown on you?'

Tsires was a coward in life and even in business, but, in his position of senior crib-spotter, he could afford to be cheeky in conversation.

'All right, you old clown,' said Lop-Ear, drawing his razor up and down through the air like a violin bow. 'Get on with it, before I run out of patience.'

'Four billion wage money,' said Tsires very softly, 'delivered tomorrow at one at the Concordia.'

'Right. You'll get your cut. No deductions this time.'

Tsires went home, but he wasn't altogether happy. He hadn't liked Lop-Ear's manner; it was too frivolous. Simon had never joked over a business deal before.

He confided in Aunt Khava, who turned on him at once:

'How long must you go on being such a fool? And don't look at Idochka's photograph, it's you I'm talking to, not her. Of course it's not a job for Simon. He'll never put himself out for a measly four billion. You'll have worked for nothing, that's all.'

'What am I to do then?' groaned Tsires. 'They'll drive me crazy, those bandits.'

'Go to Five Roubles. He might be tempted by your phoney billions. At least there's a chance, and you wont' look such a fool.'

So Tsires put on his lustrine cap and trudged off. Five Roubles lay asleep in the shadow of a white acacia in the cool of his garden. He heard Tsires out, and said drowsily:

'You'll get your cut.'

Tsires went off, delighted. He felt like a man who has just insured his life for pure gold. 'The old woman was right. You can't count on Lop-Ear. He's like a butterfly. Moody like a pregnant woman. What does it cost him to make a deal, and then play about with his razor and change his mind if it looks like too much trouble?'

But for the first and last time in his life, Tsires had blundered.

Next day, at one o'clock, Simon and Five Roubles met in front of the cash desk at the Concordia. They looked each other in the eye, and Simon asked:

'Would you mind telling me who tipped you off?'

'Old Tsires. And you?'

'Old Tsires.'

'So?'

'So old Tsires won't be with us much longer.'

'Amen,' said Five Roubles.

The two thieves parted amicably, keeping to the unwritten law that if two of them met on the same job, it was called off.

Forty minutes later, old Tsires was killed in his flat, while Aunt Khava was hanging the washing in the yard. She hadn't seen the murderer but knew it must be Simon or one of his men. Simon never forgave those who double-crossed him.

15
That Boy!

Living in Babel's house were Babel himself, his pretty, red-haired wife Evgenia, his quiet, austere mother, his sister Mary, and his mother-in-law who had come to stay with her small grandson.

One day in July a strange incident happened in the Babel household.

But I must first say something about Babel's marriage.

Babel's father, a bustling old man who kept a small agricultural machinery depot in Odessa, had been in the habit of sending his son Isaac to buy stock from a factory in Kiev. It belonged to the rich Kiev industrialist, Gronfein.

At Gronfein's, Babel met the daughter of the house, Evgenia, then in her last year at school, and they fell in love.

There could be no question of marriage: a penniless student, the son of a small Odessa tradesman, Babel was not a suitable match for Gronfein's heiress. The first time the subject was mentioned, Gronfein unbuttoned his frock-coat, stuffed his hands into the armholes of his waistcoat, and emitted the scornful sound 'Pshsh!' which speaks for itself. He didn't even bother to put his contempt into words – the wretched student wasn't worth it.

The young people saw there was only one way out – to flee to Odessa – and this they did.

The consequences followed the traditional pattern. Gronfein cursed the Babels to the tenth generation, and disinherited his daughter. It all went like in the famous poem by Sasha Cherny,[23] 'Love is not a potato', where, in similar circumstances, Papa

smashes the family dinner-service, Mama weeps into ten handkerchiefs, and the student – floridly described as 'the seducer of a maiden as pure as a poppy' – is driven from the house.

But time passed. Came the revolution. The Bolsheviks confiscated Gronfein's factory. The old man was reduced to going out unshaven, collarless and with a single gold stud in his shirt.

And then an astounding rumour reached the Gronfeins' ears: 'that boy' Babel had become an important writer, highly thought of and befriended by Maxim Gorky himself. (Just imagine, Maxim Gorky himself!) It was said that he received high royalties, and all who read him spoke respectfully of his 'great talent'. Some even added that little Genia had been very lucky to make such a brilliant match.

Clearly the old couple had slipped up, and the time had come to forgive and make friends. It hurt their pride, but they took the first step. Carrying the olive branch and excessively polite, Mrs Gronfein appeared unannounced at our Ninth Station.

Evidently feeling the need for support in her delicate mission, she had brought her eight-year-old grandson, Lucian, to ease the situation. She would have done better not to.

The Babels gave her a friendly welcome. But at the bottom of his heart Babel had inevitably retained a certain prejudice against his arrogant in-laws. Eager to make up for their past mistakes, Mrs Gronfein positively ingratiated herself with him, and stressed her warm regard for him at every step.

Izya and I often breakfasted with the Babels and witnessed the same scene repeated again and again.

Boiled eggs were served. Mrs Gronfein watched Babel like a hawk to see if he ate them and, if he didn't, asked in a hurt voice:

'Why don't you eat the eggs, Babel?' (She always called him by his surname.) 'Don't you like them?'

'Thank you, I don't want them.'

'Is that because you don't like your mother-in-law?' the old lady asked coyly, rolling her eyes. 'I cooked them specially for you.'

Babel choked over his breakfast and got up.

Izya nicknamed Lucian 'that boy'. The undertones of this southern term are impossible to convey. But the very day he arrived we all realised to our cost that Lucian was indeed 'that boy'.

From dawn till dusk Lucian's thin-lobed ears – red as though someone had been pulling them hard and enjoying it – were on fire with curiosity. Whatever was none of his business he ached to know. He spied on Babel and ourselves with fiendish vigilance. It was impossible to hide from him. Wherever we went, a minute later we could see, behind the foliage of a tamarisk or a rock on the beach, Lucian's ears translucent in the sun.

No doubt because he was eaten up by curiosity, he was unbelievably thin and bony. His eyes, black as olives, were everywhere at once, and he asked up to thirty questions a minute but never waited for an answer.

With his grasshopper temperament, he was a monstrously exhausting child. He was never quiet except when he was asleep. All day long he jerked, jumped, fidgeted, made faces, dropped and broke things, raced round the garden howling like a savage, swung on doors, fell down, laughed unnaturally, teased the dog, miaoued, tore his own hair out of spite, shook disgustingly with dry sobs if anyone crossed him, carried crabs and half-dead lizards with torn-off tails in his pockets and put them on the table in the middle of lunch, cadged, cheeked us, pinched my fishing rods and hooks and, to add to everything else, spoke in a grating voice.

'What's this?' he would ask. 'What's that for? Can you make dynamite out of a blanket? What happens if you drink tea with sand in it? Why have you got such a funny surname – Paustovsky – my Granny can never get it right till after dinner? Could you grab a tram from behind, with a hook, and stop it when it's going full speed, and pull it back? Why don't we make jam out of boiled crab?'

What we felt for the child can easily be imagined. Babel, his eyes flashing blue fire, called him 'that bat out of hell'.

Lucian's mere presence put him into such a state of nerves that he could do no work. He fled to our house and collapsed, groan-

ing. He called Lucian 'darling' in such a voice that, had the lop-eared brat had an ounce of sense, his blood would have run cold.

One hot day followed another. Mrs Gronfein showed no sign of leaving, even in the distant future.

Babel clutched his head and moaned: 'I'm finished! Done for! My head's buzzing like a brass boiler. As if that fiend were bashing it all day with a stick!'

We all racked our brains to think of how to rid Babel of Lucian and his Granny. In the end, as so often happens, he was saved by an accident.

Early one morning I called for Babel to go swimming, as we had arranged the night before.

He was writing at his desk. He looked hunted. As I opened the door, he started and, without looking round, pushed his manuscript into the drawer so savagely that he nearly tore it.

'Oh, it's you!' he sighed when he saw me. 'I thought it was Lucian. The only time I can work is before that monster wakes up.'

Babel used indelible pencils. Pale and hard as nails, I hated them. I said so. We began to argue and wasted the few vital seconds before Lucian came sneaking up the corridor. If we hadn't argued we might have got away in time.

We knew we were lost when Lucian burst triumphantly into the room. He made a dash for Babel's desk and the drawer where he believed the most interesting things were hidden, but Babel forestalled him, locked the drawer and pocketed the key.

After that, Lucian picked up one thing from the desk after another, asking what they were. Finally, he tried to snatch the indelible pencil out of Babel's hand and, after a short struggle, succeeded.

'I know what that is!' he shouted. 'It's a pencil-tensil for scribbling-dibbling!'

Babel shuddered with disgust. I said to Lucian:

'That's an indelible pencil. Give it back to Isaac Emanuelovich at once! D'you hear?'

'Indelible, incredible, inedible,' Lucian chanted, hopping on one foot and taking not the slightest notice of what I said.

'Oh, God!' moaned Babel. 'Let's go swimming. I can't stand much more of this.'

'I'll come with you,' Lucian cried. 'Granny said I could. Hunter's word. Shall I call her, and she'll tell you herself, Uncle Isaac?'

'No, no, no!' Babel sobbed in a tortured voice. 'No! Come on!'

We went to the beach. Lucian kept diving off the rocks, snorting and blowing bubbles. Babel watched him carefully, then caught hold of my hand and whispered:

'Do you know what I saw before we went out?'

'No.'

'He broke off the point of the indelible pencil and pushed it into his ear.'

'Does it matter?' I asked. 'It can't hurt him.'

'I suppose not,' Babel agreed glumly. 'Oh, to hell with him. Let him go on diving till he bursts.'

We began to talk about Herzen – Babel was re-reading him that summer. He tried to convince me that Herzen was a better writer than Tolstoy.

We were still arguing about it mildly on our way home, when Lucian ran ahead, turned to us and, pulling faces and dancing up and down, sang:

Herzen-Heffer fried in pepper,
Fried in pepper Herzen-Heffer.

'Will you,' said Babel at the end of his tether, 'hit that brat hard on the head, or I won't answer for myself?'

But Lucian must have heard him. He scuttled off to a safe distance and resumed his performance.

'Oo-oo-oo, the devil!' Babel muttered through clenched teeth. It was the first time I had heard his voice filled with such loathing. 'Another day of this, and I'll go off my head or hang myself.'

Fortunately, it didn't come to that. Half-way through breakfast, just as Mrs Gronfein was working up to her usual scene over the eggs ('Don't you like your mother-in-law, Babel?') Lucian

clutched his ear, slipped off his chair, and rolled about the floor, shrieking in a heart-rending voice and kicking out at everything within reach.

We jumped to our feet. A dark and horrid discharge was pouring from his ear. He was screaming on a high-pitched, terrifying note, while the shouting women milled around him.

The whole house was in the grip of panic. Babel sat rigid, looking anxiously at Lucian who spun like a top, shrieking:

'It hurts! Oi! It hurts! Oi! It hurts!'

I tried to tell them that Lucian was lying – he was not in pain, he couldn't be. He had only been diving and got his ears full of water, and before we went out. . . .

But Babel nearly crushed my fingers under the table.

'Shut up!' he hissed. 'Not a word about the pencil. You'll ruin everything.'

His mother-in-law was sobbing, his sister Mary mopping up the purple fluid from Lucian's ear with cottonwool, his mother insisting that the child should go at once to a nose- throat- and ear-specialist in Odessa.

Babel rose, flung his napkin away, knocking over his half-full cup of tea and, red with anger at the incompetence of ignorant women, shouted:

'Are you mad, Mama? You'll kill that boy! Do you call them doctors in Odessa? They're vets! They're quacks, charlatans! Every man Jack of them, as you know perfectly well. They treat you for bronchitis and give you pneumonia. If they take a gnat out of your ear you'll end up with a perforated ear-drum.'

'Then what am I to do, oh Lord?' Mrs Gronfein cried, falling to her knees and flinging up her arms. 'Give me eyes that I may see. What am I to do?'

Lucian drummed with his heels on the floor and roared. But he was getting hoarse.

'You don't know?' Babel asked indignantly. 'You, a native of Kiev where you have a nose- throat- and ear-specialist who is world famous! Professor Grinfeld! The one person you can trust! My advice to you is: take the child to Kiev, at once!' He looked at

his watch. 'There's a train in three hours. Mary, bandage up his ear. Tighter than that! Get his things on. I'll take you to the station and put you on the train. Don't worry about anything.'

They left in record time. As soon as they had gone, Evgenia burst out laughing and laughed until she cried. It dawned on me that the whole story of the 'world-famous professor' had been pure improvisation on Babel's part. He had carried it off like a born actor.

From that moment peace and quiet returned to our Ninth Station. Once again, we felt rational and human. And we regained our lost sense of the Odessa summer, brewing in the heat and the smell of seaweed.

A week later, a letter arrived from Kiev.

'Can you believe it?' Mrs Gronfein wrote indignantly. 'What do you think Professor Grinfeld found? Professor Grinfeld's verdict is that the little devil had stuffed a piece of indelible pencil into his ear! Apart from that there was not the slightest thing wrong with him! Not a thing! What do you think of that?'

16
Slave Labour

After the Lucian interlude we all went about at peace with the world, in that state of inner quiet that follows upon recovery from a severe illness or, as Izya said, when the soul has been purged by tragedy.

Babel got down to work. He always came out of his room silent and a little sad.

I too was writing, but very little. I was in a rare and pleasant mood. I described it myself as a mood of passionate observation of life. I had experienced it before but never so continuously and strongly.

Izya had finished his leave; he was back at *The Seaman,* and returned to Ninth Station only for the night. Sometimes he even slept in town. This suited me in a way. I would have felt too self-conscious in front of him to go on slowly, endlessly examining my surroundings, sometimes spending hours over a single detail, a thorny branch or a shell on the beach.

More than ever before, the smallest contact with the world around me filled me with joy.

The July days, a little yellow from the drought, merged into one, long, peaceful day. I often lay in the shifting shadow of the acacia in the garden, watching whatever I saw on the ground within the span of my arm.

Still more often, I walked to the far end of the beach, away from the houses, and swam about forty yards to a rock where I could lie all day in a hollow, sheltered from the sun, out of reach of the waves and hidden from the shore.

I would take a book with me, but seldom read more than three or four pages a day. I fished for bullheads, or watched the ancient crab who often poked his head out from behind the rock and played hide and seek. As soon as our eyes met, he backed crossly into the thick, reddish seaweed that looked like branches of fir. But if I pretended not to see him, he raised his claw threateningly and sidled cautiously along, eyeing the carrots on the ground beside me (in those days our food was mainly carrots and tomatoes).

One day I was so busy reading that he managed to snatch one, fell with it into the water and sank like a stone. A moment later the carrot surfaced. The crab swam after it and tried to grab it, but I gave him a crack on the shell with my bamboo fishing rod and he scuttled away sideways to the bottom. I even thought he gave a cry of fright. Certainly he looked at me in terror, rolling his eyes.

The crab vanished, but a branch of flowering broom drifted close to the rock. I put my hand into the water to lift it out, and felt a shock. Although my hand was in the water, inches under the surface, I distinctly felt the sun warm on my palm.

I find it hard to convey the extraordinary impression of the heat of the sun, softened by the sea water, of sunshine touching my fingers while the greenish, buoyant water flowed between them.

It was a physical feeling which seemed close to happiness. I expected nothing better. It seemed unlikely that the surrounding world could give me anything more beautiful than this warm, friendly handclasp.

I fished out the broom, lay flat on the warm stone, and held the branch close to my eyes.

At Fountain the broom flowered all along the cliffs. But it grew with particular luxuriance at the foot of the garden walls, built of porous sandstone. The stone was friendly to the broom. The broom evidently liked heat, and hot streams of air sprang from the minute pores of the sandstone and created an area of warmth and shelter round the wall.

There, the broom took strong root and, like a large porcupine, shot the quills of its dark olive-green branches at the sky.

The flowers, like bits of tender, compact sponge, absorbed at birth the golden colour of the sun.

They kept its brightness untarnished until late autumn. Then they slowly burnt themselves out on the cliffs, like rows of tiny lighthouses with golden beams you could see from far away.

Little by little I collected my facts. They all existed in the world outside but quickly turned into particles of my inner life.

Indeed, they did not for a moment exist independently. Immediately overgrown with images and particles of make-believe, they were like plants covered with fine dew-drops. You can no longer see the plant itself, although you recognise its shape.

I said this one evening to Babel.

We were sitting on the parapet on the cliff. Babel was absent-mindedly throwing pebbles into the sea; they cracked like pistol shots as they hit the rocks.

'It's all right for you other writers,' said Babel, although I was not yet a writer. 'You can wrap things up in the dew of your imagination, as you put it! What an awful expression, by the way! But what would you do if you had no imagination? Like me.'

'Rubbish!' I said angrily.

He seemed not to have heard me.

'Not one drop,' he repeated after a long pause and several pebbles. 'I'm quite serious. I can't make anything up. I have to know everything, down to the last wrinkle, or I can't even begin to write. "Authenticity", that's the motto, and I'm stuck with it! That's why I write so little and so slowly. Because it's terribly hard. So much for Mozart, the joy of creativity, the free flight of imagination! I wrote somewhere, I'm getting old from asthma, a mysterious disease I've had from birth and inherited together with my weak constitution. But that's a lie. What puts years on me is every single short-story I write. I work like a black, like a navvy, as if I had to dig up Everest with my own hands. When I start, I never believe I'll have the strength to finish. Sometimes I could weep, I'm so tired. It stops my circulation. If I get stuck over a sentence, it gives me spasms. And I'm always stuck over a sentence!'

'But your writing is so fluent,' I said. 'How do you do it?'

'That's style.' He gave a senile giggle in imitation of Moskvin.[24] 'Style! It's style that does it, young man, he-he-he! I'll write about the weekly washing if you like, and the prose might sound like Julius Caesar! That I seem to manage. But, you understand, that's not the essence of art, it's the bricks, or the marble or the bronze. Come, I'll show you how I do it. I'm a miser, a skinflint, but just for you! . . .'

By now, it was dark inside the house. Beyond the garden the sea rumbled more and more quietly with the approach of night. Fresh air poured in from the sea and drove out the sultry wormwood smell of the steppe. Babel lit a small lamp. The light fell on his glasses; behind them his eyes looked inflamed; he was always having trouble with his eyes.

He got a thick wad of typescript out of his desk; there were at least a hundred pages.

'Know what that is?'

I had no idea. Was it possible that Babel had at last written a full length novella and kept it a secret from all of us? I could not believe it. Babel, whose short stories were almost like telegrams! Who packed everything into the smallest possible space. For whom a story of ten pages was much too long and surely padded!

A hundred pages of his concentrated prose? No, it couldn't be!

I looked at the cover page, and saw the title 'Lyubka the Cossack'. This was still more puzzling.

'Didn't I hear that "Lyubka the Cossack" is a very short short-story that hasn't yet been published? Do you really mean you've expanded it into a novella?'

He covered the typescript with his hand and laughed, his eyes crinkling.

'It's "Lyubka" all right,' he said, blushing. 'And it's fifteen pages long. But these are the twenty-two versions – two hundred pages of it.'

'Twenty-two versions!'

'What's so terrible about that?' he bridled at once. 'Look here, a work of art is not a pot-boiler. You write several versions of the

same story – so what? I'm not even sure the twenty-second is fit to publish. It looks as if it could still be tightened up. It's all this elimination that makes for power of language and style. Of language and style,' he repeated. 'You take anything – an anecdote, a bit of gossip – and you turn it into a story you yourself can't bear to put down. It glows like a jewel. It's round like a pebble. It hangs together by the cohesion of its parts. And its cohesion is so powerful that even lightning can't split it up. People will read it. And remember it. And they'll laugh over it, not because it's cheerful but because you always feel like laughing when somebody has brought something off. I have the nerve to talk about bringing it off only because we are alone. And you won't tell anyone about this conversation so long as I live. You must give me your word. It's no credit to me, of course. Goodness knows how someone like me, the son of a small broker, gets possessed by the demon or the angel of art. But whichever it is, I have to obey him like a slave, like a pack-mule. I've sold him my soul, and I have to write as well as I know how. It's my happiness, or my cross. More of a cross, I suppose. But take it away, and every drop of my blood will go with it and I won't be worth a chewed up fag-end. That's the work that makes a human being out of me and not just an Odessa street-corner philosopher.'

He paused, then went on more bitterly.

'I've got no imagination. All I've got is the longing for it. You remember Blok – "I see the enchanted shore, the enchanted distance." He got there all right, but I won't. I see that shore unbearably far off. I'm too sober. But I thank my lucky stars that at least I long for it. I work till I drop, I do all I can because I want to be at the feast of the gods and I'm afraid they'll throw me out.'

He took off his glasses, and wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his patched jacket.

'I didn't choose to be born a Jew,' he said suddenly. 'I think I can understand everything. Only not the reason for that black villainy they call anti-semitism.

'I came safely through a Jewish pogrom as a child, only they tore my pigeon's head off. Why? . . . I don't want Evgenia to come

in,' he said softly. 'Put the door on the hook, will you? This kind of talk frightens her. She's liable to cry all night. She thinks I'm very lonely. Perhaps I am?'

What could I answer?

'So there it is,' said Babel, stooping short-sightedly over his manuscript. 'I work like a pack mule, but it's my own choice. I'm like a galley-slave who's chained for life to his oar but who loves the oar. Everything about it. Every grain of wood he's polished with his hands. If you use enough elbow grease, even the coarsest wood gets to look like ivory. That's what we have to do with words, and with our Russian language. Warm it and polish it with your hand, and it glows like a jewel.

'But I meant to tell you all I do, in the right order. The first version of a story is terrible. All in bits and pieces tied together with boring "link passages" as dry as old rope. You have the first version of "Lyubka" there – you can see for yourself. It yaps at you, it's clumsy, helpless, toothless.

'That's where the real work begins. I go over each sentence, time and again. I start by cutting all the words it can do without. You have to keep your eye on the job because words are very sly, the rubbishy ones go into hiding and you have to dig them out – repetitions, synonyms, things that simply don't mean anything.

'After that, I type the story and I let it lie for two or three days. If I can hold out. Then I check it again, sentence by sentence and word by word. And again I find a lot of rubbish I missed the first time. So I make another copy, and another – as many as I have to, until I've cleaned it all up and there's not a speck of dirt left.

'But that's not all! When I've done the cleaning up, I go over every image, metaphor, comparison, to see if they are fresh and accurate. If you can't find the right adjective for a noun, leave it alone. Let the noun stand by itself.

'A comparison must be as accurate as a slide rule, and as natural as the smell of fennel. Oh, I forgot – before I take out the rubbish, I break up the text into shorter sentences. The more full stops the better. I'd like to have that passed as a law. Not more than one idea and one image to one sentence. Never be afraid of full stops.

Actually, my own sentences are too short – that's because of my asthma. I can't talk for long. The longer the sentence the more I get short of breath.

'I take out all the participles and adverbs I can. Participles are heavy, angular, they destroy the rhythm. They grate like tanks going over rubble. Three participles to one sentence, and you kill the language. All that "presenting", "obtaining", "concentrating" and so on. . . . Adverbs are lighter. They can even lend you wings in a way. But too many of them make the language spineless, it starts mioaling. . . . A noun needs only one adjective, the choicest. Only a genius can afford two adjectives to one noun.

'The breaking up into paragraphs and the punctuation have to be done properly but only for the effect on the reader. A set of dead rules is no good. A new paragraph is a wonderful thing. It lets you quietly change the rhythm, and it can be like a flash of lightning that shows the same landscape from a different aspect. There are writers, even good ones, who scatter paragraphs and punctuation marks all over the place. They can write good prose, but it has an air of muddle and carelessness because of this. Even Kuprin used to do that.

'Line is as important in prose as in an engraving. It has to be clear and hard.

'My twenty-two versions of "Lyubka" gave you a shock. They are all part of the weeding, sifting, pulling the story out into a single thread. There can be as much difference between the first and last version of a book as between a greasy bit of packing paper and Boticelli's "Spring".'

'It really is slave labour,' I said. 'A man should think twenty times before he decides to become a writer.'

'But the most important thing of all,' said Babel, 'is not to kill the story by working on it. Or else all your labour has been in vain. It's like walking a tight-rope. Well, there it is. . . . We ought all to take an oath not to mess up our job.'

I went home, but I was awake all night. I lay on the verandah and looked at some lilac-coloured planet that had tunnelled the immeasurable spaces of the sky with its delicate light and was

flashing signals, trying to approach the earth, but without success.

The night was huge, its darkness made it boundless. I knew that on such nights the sea had a dull sheen and, somewhere far beyond the horizon, the tops of the mountains shone with reflected light. They were cooling down. It was a pity they gave back their daylight warmth to cosmic space. Our verbena could have done with it. It held its petals clasped like hands over its face to keep it from the cold before the dawn.

In the morning, Izya Livshitz came over from Odessa. He usually arrived in the evening so I was surprised by this early visit.

Avoiding my eyes, he told me that four days ago, on the 7th of August, Alexander Blok had died in Petrograd.

Izya turned away, cleared his throat and said:

'Will you go and tell Babel? . . . I can't.'

I felt my heart thumping against my ribs and the blood draining from my head. All the same I went.

Teaspoons tinkled peacefully on the verandah.

I stood for a few moments at the gate, heard Babel laugh at something and, hiding behind the garden wall not to be seen from the verandah, went home to our dilapidated house. I too could not bring myself to tell Babel that Blok had died.

17
Near and Far

I saw you go down into the narrow dwelling
where there are not even dreams. And
still I cannot believe it.

DELACROIX

The weather was very still. At the foot of the red Sarmatian clay the sea lay molten and heavy. The shore had the sharp, dusty smell of long-ripe goosefoot shedding its seeds. Izya Livshitz quoted Blok:

The silence of the dying grain –
A time of radiance in the world.

We talked endlessly about Blok. One evening Bagritsky came from Odessa, and recited Blok nearly all night through. Izya and I were silent. We lay on the dark verandah. The night wind crackled in the dry vine leaves.

Bagritsky sat, cross-legged like a Turk, on an old mattress worn flat as a pancake. He was starting an attack of asthma. He gasped, and smoked asmatol, a greenish powder that smells like burnt hay, and breathed with such difficulty that he seemed to suck the air through a straw. It wheezed, gurgled and rattled in his chest.

He was not supposed to talk during an attack. But he wanted to recite Blok all the same, and we didn't try to dissuade him.

For a long time he sat muttering, trying to calm himself: 'Just a minute. It won't be long now. Only don't talk to me.' In the end

he began to recite without waiting for the attack to pass, and something like a miracle happened: apparently soothed by the rhythm of the verse, his breathing quietened, and his strong, beautiful voice rang out more and more clearly.

He recited the best-known poems, and we were grateful for it.

A thick and heavy curtain at the entrance,
Beyond the window – night and mist. . . .
What of the freedom, hateful to you now,
Don Juan, who have learned to fear?

Both the poem and Bagritsky's voice seemed to me, for some reason, so irreparably tragic that I felt like weeping.

Again there was silence, and the darkness broken only by the unintelligible signalling of the stars. Then again the grave music of a familiar poem:

Already in my heart I know you. The years go by,
And still the image lingers. . . .

So the night passed. Bagritsky recited, almost sang the 'Verses about Russia', *The Scythians,* Ravenna 'sleeping in sleepy eternity's arms'. It was almost dawn before he fell asleep. He slept sitting up, leaning against the wall of the verandah, and groaned in his deeply exhausting sleep.

His face was drawn, wizened; a crust, as of dry wormwood juice, had formed on his blue-white lips, and he looked like an enormous, tousled bird.

I was to remember that white crust on Bagritsky's lips several years later, in Moscow. I was following his coffin. Behind us, the hooves of a cavalry squadron clicked on the cobbles.

Ill and breathless, Samuel Marshak[25] walked beside me, leaning trustfully on my still-young shoulder, and saying:

'You remember? "By hooves and stones . . . the years are tried. . . . Immortal wormwood . . . impregnates the waters – and its bitterness . . . is on our lips." How . . . magnificent!'

A dusty sky hung over dingy, sultry Yakimovka. Children shouted, playing 'I spy' in the back-yards. The band struck up a muted funeral march, and the cavalry horses, obedient to the music, took slower steps.

But on that far-away morning in 1921, Bagritsky left by the first tram, without even having tea, and without calling on Babel. He was feeling ill. He coughed, his breath wheezed, and he hardly spoke. Evidently he had overtaxed his lungs the night before.

Izya and I took him to the tram, and went to see Babel. As usual in times of trouble, we needed company.

Babel was writing in his room. He pushed his manuscript aside, and placed a large grey pebble over it.

Occasionally a soft breeze from the sea blew in, and everything light and mobile in the room – window curtains, papers, the flowers in a tumbler – fluttered like a small bird in a snare.

'What shall we do now?' Babel said sadly. 'We won't see another Blok if we live to be two hundred.'

'Did you ever see him?' I asked.

I waited for him to say no, and relieve my mind. I am not often envious, but for a long time I was bitterly to envy all who had seen and heard Blok.

'I did, yes,' said Babel. 'I even went to his flat at the corner of Pryazhka and Officer Street.'

'What was he like?'

'Not at all as you imagine.'

'How do you know what I think of him?'

'Because it's sure to be what I thought of him myself. Until I saw him. He was not at all like a fallen angel. Nor was he the embodiment of exquisite feelings and thoughts. He was a reserved, middle-aged man, strong, though tired. He had very good manners, so he didn't burden you with his gloom or his learning. First we sat in the dining-room on two, facing, bent-wood chairs. The kind of chairs that bore you at sight. It was a depressing room, anything but the hall of the shining knight in the white mask. And his study didn't smell of Nile lilies and intoxicating ladies in black silk. It smelt of dust and books. An ordinary flat in an ordinary house. Now you look disgusted! You don't like what I'm telling you, and you'll go away saying I'm a sceptic, a cynic, with no fire in my heart. I see only the grey undercoat that shows through the marvellous colours, I don't even know the

colours are there. But that's just your romantic schoolboy nonsense. The beauty of a spirit like Blok can do without a gilt frame. And without organ peals or incense. Blok was by nature a prophet. He even had the prophet's hard look in his eyes. He saw the doom of the old world. The seeds of destruction were already coming up. But the night dragged on, and it seemed as though it would never end. So he welcomed even the cheerless, harsh light of the new, revolutionary dawn as a deliverance. He took the revolution into his poet's world and he wrote *The Twelve*. He really was a prophet, of course. Both in his visions and in that shattering music he heard in the sound of Russian speech.

'He could transpose what he saw from one plane to another; and there it developed unexpected qualities for half-blind people like us. You and I see flowers – roses, say – in summer, in gardens or squares. But that wasn't enough for him. He wanted to set new, unheard-of roses alight on earth. And he did:

And roses, autumn roses
I dream at every step
Through mist and fire and frost
On the light, white snow.

You wish you had seen Blok. Naturally! But if I had an ounce of imagination, I would try to see, in every possible concrete detail, what exactly Blok was saying, if only in those four lines. Picture it to myself clearly, accurately – and then the world would reveal to me one of its hidden and remarkable facets, and, living and singing in that world, this extraordinary man, such as are born once in a century. He takes us by the hand – insignificant people, crippled by our "properly run" lives – and leads us to those dunes over a northern sea where, you remember, "the sunset turns the sky into a deep and many-coloured chalice" and "dusk holds hands with dawn". And where the air is so clear that a distant, red buoy – an ordinary, roughly made object – "glows in the dusk like the jewel of the Belle Ferronière.'"

Babel had an extraordinary memory, he was always quoting poetry by heart and hardly ever made a mistake.

'There it is,' he said after a moment. 'Blok knew the ways into the kingdom of beauty. He was a giant, of course, he towers above everyone. The only one who rings in the heart as splendidly as a thousand harps. But most people think it matters that he had bentwood chairs in his dining-room, and that he was "Zemhussar"[26] in the World War. They like that. Any smelly little flame of ignorant gossip and prejudice will bring them running.'

It was the first time I heard Babel use a comparison like the 'ringing of a thousand harps'. He was severe, even self-conscious in his choice of words in conversation. Anything in the way of flourish or glitter made him blush and frown with distaste. Perhaps because of this, any words of the 'high flown' sort he used, sounded natural and rang true, coming from his lips. But he used them very seldom indeed, and always pulled up at once and began jeering at himself. This could be extremely irritating. Izya, for one, could never stand Babel in this mood of almost cynical self-mockery. Nor could I, and my own clashes with Babel – admittedly fairly rare – all arose over his savage debunking of himself, and putting on cynical airs.

But he didn't debunk his 'thousand harps' and, from the way he spoke, I thought he probably read Blok to himself at night, when he was alone and shed his disguise.

I was later convinced of this by Bagritsky, who was fond of quoting other people's sayings and did it with the simplicity of a child. One day, when we were talking about Blok, he coughed and began a little uncertainly:

'You understand – nothing but harps and the muted voice of the poet. Blok's voice was like that. I could recite all his poems to the sound of harps, and each one differently. Honestly! I would draw out the music from each verse, like a golden thread from a tangled skein. And people would listen, and forget time, and life and death, and the movement of the stars and the beating of their own hearts. There's some sensitive young German scribbler, I forget his name – as a poet he's a bit subject to colds in the head, but he wrote one thing that wasn't bad. It was about there being

beautiful sounds locked up in every human word. But these sounds submit only to the will of great poets and musicians. Only they can release them from captivity inside the words.'

'Eddie!' said Izya. 'Stop repeating Babel's words and twisting them. This is a horrible hotch-potch of what he says.'

'It's what I think myself,' Bagritsky replied modestly.

'Really? And since when have you become so eloquent?'

'That's enough!' Bagritsky snapped. 'I'm sick of sarcastic schoolboys with the brains of white mice. Why can't you leave me in peace, for goodness sake? Why are you all running after me, trying to prove to me I'm not as clever as you would like to think?'

I managed to stop the quarrel, but Bagritsky grumbled on for a long time about 'imported infant prodigies' and 'intellectual renegades'.

He was hurt because, instead of being charmed by the fascinating subject he had brought up, Izya had butted in like the spoil-sport devil in the fairy tale.

Any show of disrespect for poetry wounded Bagritsky to the quick, and could even lead to violence.

In general, apart from Babel and some women poets, young Odessa poets and writers were inclined to be very quarrelsome. Literary arguments, even on such abstract themes as regular and irregular metres in verse, were apt to end in personal insults if not actual blows.

18

A Fight in a Good Cause

Posters the colour of watery tomato soup appeared on the walls. They announced a fabulous poetry evening shortly to be held in some dilapidated hall in Pushkin Street; all the poets of Odessa were to take part.

Printed in bold type across the poster was the further announcement:

AT THE END OF THE EVENING
THE POET SHENGELI WILL BE BEATEN UP

Underneath, someone had added in ink:

'If he dares to come.'

The tickets were expensive. They sold out within three hours.

Izya Livshitz thought the beating up had been announced with the knowledge and consent of Shengeli.

The poet George Shengeli was a good-natured man of exotic appearance. I could never understand why many of the local poets seemed to dislike him. I asked Bagritsky, but he was evasive. In the end I assumed that baiting Shengeli was a form of literary sport. It added to the zest of life in Odessa's poetic circles.

Shengeli seemed to me to enter into the spirit and to put on his air of Roman stoicism as part of the game.

During his clashes with the poets, his clean-cut face grew pale and looked like a marble carving. As such, it would have been an ornament to the Roman Forum, Izya said – 'Or perhaps to the Pantheon?' he added with a worried frown.

Shengeli was tall, his eyes had retained the sparkle of youth. He

went about Odessa barefoot, in a tropical pith helmet. For the rest, he was widely cultured, wrote sophisticated verse, translated French poets and was well-disposed towards his fellow-men, and well mannered.

All this annoyed many local poets – brash young men who prided themselves on their freedom from affectation and above all from the mortal sins of too much education and forebearance.

I had seen Shengeli for the first time in Moscow, at the beginning of the war. He was taking part in one of Igor Severyanin's[27] recitals and reading his own poems in the intervals. They were poems about his native, stony Kerch, an ancient land where 'Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns and Vends sleep in the desert soil', and where 'ageless legends haunt the minds of men'.

He said about himself:

I breathe with the breath of the tides
And, as of old, my blood
Is warmed by the same warmth
As the southern sea. . . .

I have always felt that I could as easily be carried away by certain other occupations as I am by writing – sailing, for instance, or archaeology, or the further exploration of countries long ago discovered.

Archaeology is the study of antiquity, and ever since my childhood antiquity had meant to me the wind racing over the feather-grass, in ancient, lonely sun-baked lands, to which it brings a hint of freshness from the near-by coast, or a broken tile made by the thin grey fingers of an Iranian potter, or a black clay pipe shaped like the bow of an Achaean ship and lost by some Dnieper Cossack near the salt lakes of Perekop. I was fascinated by the colour of these ancient lands – harsh, rusty, mineral.

That was how I always pictured to myself the ancient regions of the earth. When I actually saw them I was pleasantly surprised to find that the colours that bear witness to the fabulous age of the earth are many more than I had supposed.

I was finally convinced of this in the Aegian Islands, Greece and Italy. There, the rusty earth showed in the distance through the

indigo air of morning or the majestic, dull copper of dusk. Antiquity wore many colours and many tones, combining crimson rocks and olive foliage, or the dark gold of sunset with the lilac air of an Ionian evening.

The strong, hard colours of antiquity belong to the south rather than to the north. There they are more noticeable, you see them more often.

From a hotel window in Rome you can look at a fresh lawn being sprinkled with artificial rain from nickel-plated pipes and, almost next to it, see the ancient, ageless soil of the arena of the Coliseum.

It looks as old as the sky over Rome, over the near-by Appenines, over Calabria burnt to a heap of cement dust.

Calabria smokes with heat like a huge fire on a still day. Her coast smells of flint from which a spark has just been struck. Were it not for the dense, cool, violet sea washing this dry land, the sight of it would make you shudder like the threshold of hell.

The sense of antiquity is also the sense of the infinite flight of time, a sense of history, and of the future.

For some reason this sense of time is always sharper near the sea.

I have digressed from my story, and I might as well digress a little further and say something of what the sense of being by the sea means to me.

You can look at the sea from the deck of an ocean liner or of a fishing barge.

From the low deck of a barge you not only see it but you smell the tang of sea-water as the boat passes submerged rocks. For an instant they are laid bare by a wave and reveal their thick coats of shaggy seaweed.

And in that moment, between one wave and the next, the seaweed gives out a sharp smell, and you can fill your lungs with it to the point of giddiness.

You never smell the sea from the high deck of a liner. All you smell are hot engine oil, cigarette smoke, and lavatory deodorants.

You really get the feel of the sea only in places where its smells have been brought out by pure and prolonged heat. They hardly

exist in Yalta, for instance. The surf smells of sodden cigarette ends and orange peel, not of scorching hot breakwaters, old rope, savory, washed up mines of 1912 vintage, harbour timbers grey with salt, or pink fishing nets.

This is the sea you smell only in ports like Kerch, Novorossisk, Feodosia, Mariupol or Skadovsk.

There are seaside resorts built over with blue ice-cream kiosks, cluttered up with plaster statues of boy and girl athletes, teeming with skull-caps, sandals, turkish towels and striped pyjamas. And there are shores burnt by millenia of sunlight reflected from huge southern seas, and hot currents of the cleanest air in the world.

This sun and air give them their harsh colour – ochre, rusty, greyish, like cinders – the colour of time out of mind, of eternity. And from century to century the countless, measured waves break over their bare, petrified clay.

The real sea has many different smells, colours and sounds. If I had the time, and were not so nervous about upsetting the balance of my book, I would expand this digression to the size of a volume.

I must admit, I can be perfectly happy reading a guide-book on Greece, Botkin's *Letters from Spain* or the *Diaries* of Miklukho-Maklaï, and equally happy pouring the sand through my fingers and resting with the whole of my being, while the wind pats my cheeks with its cool damp hands. It seems to be pleased that there is not another soul on the beach, all the way to the horizon where the bluish promontories look like a company of bears lapping the sea-water.

All day long the stiff grass rustles on the cliffs. Infinitely old, this gentle sound, heard on this shore for century after century, imparts the love of wisdom and simplicity.

On the night of the party, Izya, Yasha Lifshitz and I managed with difficulty to get into the hall, where the poet Chicherin was reciting amidst a frenzied din of laughter and catcalls.

The noise died down a little when a man with a withered arm and a clever taut face followed him on to the stage. I had never seen Vladimir Narbut before, though I had long admired his poetry.

Paying no attention to the turmoil, he began to recite in a cold, menacing voice with a slight Ukrainian accent:

And I, a rotting log
A coffin weathered by the years. . . .

There was something sinister about his poems, although at times a moving tenderness broke into the lines:

It is of you, of you, of you
I want to speak in sleepless verse. . . .

Gradually, the audience grew silent.

The stage was packed to bursting with young men and girls, Valentin Katayev among them, noticeable by his bright red fez. The platform creaked, swayed and looked ready to collapse at any minute.

'Can they really all be poets?' asked Yasha, who had a habit of asking naive questions. 'There are enough of them to fill a whole country in Central Europe.'

Shengeli sat on a kitchen stool at the foot of the platform, his topee on his knees. So might a bronzed legionary, finding himself in the Senate, have held his battle-scarred helmet.

'Thank goodness he's come,' Izya sighed with relief. 'Now we can be sure of a row.'

Hoarse and sulky, Katayev read a poem about blind fish. Fishermen from Sanzheyka and Great Fountain sometimes caught blind fish from the Danube: they had been blinded by the change from fresh water to salt. The poem was well received but not given an ovation. The audience was looking forward to the row and saving its strength.

Kirsanov,[28] still a beardless boy, noisy and quarrelsome, kept jumping up from his chair and shouting provocatively at Shengeli. But Shengeli looked unmoved and this evidently angered Kirsanov who jumped up again to shout something still more insulting.

Each time he got up a sleepy-looking boy who sat behind him pulled him back by his coat tails; the coat was cracking at the seams. Kirsanov swore and sat down, but bobbed up again at once.

A few other young men joined in the shouting.

But the row was plainly not getting under way. The audience grew restive.

'Why are they so excited, these poets?' asked Yasha. 'You'd think they're electing the Poet Laureate, or awarding the Nobel Prize. What are they trying to do?'

Izya, who knew, said nothing.

Then a number of things happened which confused the audience completely.

An unknown actress with a baying voice began to recite Myrra Lokhvitskaya. This was a mistake. It provoked a disapproving growl which soon turned into an angry roar:

'To hell with doggerel! To hell with Myrra! Better give us "The Night breathed Lust and Passion"!'

The actress, a dappled blonde with arms like withered branches, clutched at the table for support and broke into theatrical sobs.

Shengeli rose, on fire with old-world chivalry. The mob of poets and their dishevelled girl-friends had dared insult an innocent woman! Shame! He shouted a few insults at the crowd.

Then Bagritsky jumped up. I was sure he was going to set upon and rend his enemy Shengeli, but he turned instead to the audience at large and made a violent gesture as though to deal a knock-out blow to all. He swung his right arm, shrieked, fainted, and crashed to the floor.

The hall was in an uproar. No one could make out what was happening. Medical aid was summoned. His face stony, Narbut closed the meeting.

Human eddies of arguing, spluttering, yelling boys and girls milled around the exits. Insults and encouragements flew like tennis balls across the hall.

Ambulance attendants pushed through the crowd and led away Bagritsky, conscious but white with pain. 'I think I've broken my shoulder,' he said to us with a tight smile. 'Or dislocated it perhaps. . . . What bloody fools! Couldn't even start a proper row!'

The ambulance drove off. Yasha and I broke through the serried ranks of poets and their disciples, and came out into the open air and quiet of Pushkin Street.

'What on earth was all that meant to be?' Yasha asked again. 'Bedlam, or a drunken brawl? Or just a boyish prank? And at such a time! It's too silly.'

Yasha was furious. We saw Izya and joined him. He looked dejected.

'Well, that was a flop,' he said. 'They ought never to have started that nonsense – boasting they would actually beat up Shengeli. Lucky for us people didn't ask for their money back.'

'But what was it all about?' I asked.

It was then he told us that the party had been held in aid of the Homeless Children's Fund. There was a special commission in charge of the fund. Its delegate had made the arrangements with a group of poets. To make sure of a full house, they had decided they must have a sensational attraction. They racked their brains for a long time; finally someone came up with the idea of beating up Shengeli. This was welcomed as novel and original. For the sake of the cause, Shengeli readily agreed.

The plan had failed because too few people had been taken into the organisers' confidence. But since all the tickets had been sold, the delegate was delighted. He even planned a repeat performance.

A Casino was opened in Havana Street, all the takings to go to the Fund. The game was *petits chevaux,* a form of roulette.

I went one evening with Torelli. Tobacco smoke hung in the air like stratus cloud. Cigarette butts soaked in the dregs of beer at the bottom of dirty glasses. Pale young men in naval caps gambled furiously in silence.

The croupier, an old man with an English parting in his thin hair, rattled on in a tinny voice like a wound-up toy.

'*Les jeux sont faits.* No more stakes. Citizen, will you please remove your hand from the table. Yes, it's in my way. Remove it at once. Before it's too late. And kindly refrain from using obscene language. This is a government institution, not a brothel. Citizen players! I'll stop the game unless that thief goes. Either you talk to him or I call the police. Finished! No more play. Take your stakes back. The Casino is closed!'

Then some brawny lad in a check cap and shaggy muffler, a

cigarette between his lips, would go up to the thief, silently grab him by the shirt front, pull him off his chair (the chair invariably crashed to the floor), propel him at arm's length to the door and throw him out. Each time the door bell, which had survived from pre-revolutionary times, gave a frightened jingle. The only other sound throughout the scene was that of the brawny lad and the thief breathing heavily through the nose.

The lad returned to the table and the croupier said:

'Well done, young man, *merci beaucoup*. The game continues. Raise your stakes, citizens! The longer you think about it, the more you put off your lady luck!'

The thief stood on the pavement, clutched the clients by the sleeve as they went in, and addressed them earnestly:

'Be my witness, young man, I'll fix that spotty-faced croupier and that bastard from the water-melon dock if it's the last thing I do. Spit in my eye if I don't. Where are you off to! Oh, you're in a hurry? Well, I humbly ask you to wait a minute just the same.'

Unbuttoning his coat, he thrust his mighty, heaving chest at the client, and whined drunkenly:

'At least give me five thousand. I'll turn it into a million. You'll take half. Don't drive a man to desperation.'

He was hard to shake off, and most people gave him something, as did Torelli and I. We lost the rest of our money on a single throw, whereupon the croupier, frowning at the foul smoke from his cigarette, said coldly:

'No stakes? You'll have to do better than that, boys.'

We left, offended. Later, I returned several times, but never again to gamble. I watched the croupier. I was hypnotised by his mixture of insolence, politeness, utter scorn for everyone and incredible rudeness. I wondered what he had been in the past. He turned out to be a former opera singer: Torelli had actually heard him in the role of Mephistopheles.

19
Time Slows Down

In August I decided to spend my leave from *The Seaman* in Ovidiopol.

A lethargic little town, lost in the steppe on the shores of the Dniester estuary, it was reputed to be the place of exile and death of the poet Ovid.

In fact, Ovid died in a Roman convict settlement much further south, near the mouth of the Danube. Before his death he wrote complaining of the Scythian cold and the gloomy, turbulent Black Sea.

I could never understand why the Black Sea had struck him as gloomy. I had always thought of it as one of the brightest and gayest of seas. And how could anyone speak of Scythian cold in a region where it doesn't even snow every winter, and when the snow does come it stays only a few days and leaves the thawed-out earth smelling faintly of spring?

That autumn of 1921 was dry and burnt to its very core. The trouble about walking to Ovidiopol was not so much the heat as the churning dust. It rushed in whirling pillars along the dirt-tracks, turned everyone as brown as a Kafir, and was impossible to wash off.

So, instead of going to the estuary, I decided to follow the sea-shore, past the deserted Fountains to the last tram stop. The stop was known as Kovalevsky's Dacha. As I dislike travelling blind, I got a book called *Old Odessa* and read up everything it had to say of Kovalevsky and his *dacha*.

I learned that Kovalevsky had been a rich and lonely Odessan who bought a dry strip of coastal steppe; there he built himself a house by the sea and, next to it, a tall round tower like a lighthouse. The tower had no function. He built it, as children say, 'just like that', to please himself. He climbed it a few times, had tea on the top landing, and ended by jumping off it and crashing to his death.

The house quickly turned into a ruin. A clumsy, gloomy building, no one wanted to live in it. But the tower remained and was mentioned in all the Black Sea navigation manuals. It seems that it was an important landmark on the way to Odessa, so it was preserved and people were forbidden to pull it down for the stones.

I knew that several houses stood empty nearby and I decided to stay in whichever of them I liked best.

I walked from Odessa, taking my time over the journey. I set out from Black Sea Street at first light.

Although nothing happened on the way, every detail of the road imprinted itself on my memory so that afterwards I could at any moment retrace it in my mind, step by step.

In later years I went over that road again and again, always on foot, although by then, not only buses and trams were running but even taxis were raising the dust.

The whole charm of the way, its compelling fascination for me, lay in its nearness to the sea. At no point were the cliffs too far away for me to hear the waves and smell the seaweed.

I had only to bend down and pick up a white stone and blow off the dust, to know that here, hot from the midday sun, was a grained pebble from the bottom of the sea, and to wish I knew the history of that piece of stone over all its thousands of years.

Everything along the road smelt of sea and sun – even the kiosks where, once upon a time, cider had been sold. The cracking paint peeled off in diamond-shaped flakes and smelt of the heat of the sun. The empty zinc counters were green with the pollen of goosefoot and wild wormwood, and the same pollen gave a greenish tinge to the whole surface of the road.

The walls – they looked as though they were built of petrified sponge – smelt of the sea. Countless minute shells were encrusted

in the stones, scratchy and glittering like chipped mother-of-pearl.

In places the thick dust on the road was marked by a fisherman's net which had been dragged across it at dawn. The net had laid the dust and left clumps of rough seaweed and tiny fish which by now were dry and looked like tinsel cut-outs. The clumps of seaweed, wet and hot inside, smelt of brine and steamed.

Lizards ran about the orange Marseilles tiles on the roofs. I imagined that the making of these tiles (they must have come from somewhere in the south of France, near Marseilles or Toulon) was a leisurely craft which had kept some of its ancient secrets and had therefore a certain aura of romance. I was sure that all the Marseilles tile factories stood near the sea.

I wished I could study the manufacturing process and write a short book about it. I don't know how much useful information the reader would have gained from it, but I would certainly have tried to infect him with my feeling for the poetry of making tiles.

I also liked these tiles because they were connected with the south and the sea: looking from the window of the Moscow–Odessa train, I had only to catch sight of red-tiled roofs in the glassy distance to know that the sea could not be far off.

The tides were always washing up polished fragments of tiles on the beach and I never tired of admiring their rich carroty colour and finely grained texture.

Here and there in Great Fountain dusty bunches of grapes hung in the small gardens of fishermen's huts. The long grapes smelt of nutmeg and shone with pink juice against the light. I got a large bunch in exchange for three fills of tobacco.

Beyond Great Fountain the road turned off into the steppe. The houses stayed behind, shy of the blinding heat. On either side of the highway rustled weightless leaves of maize. The cobs had all been picked. However hard I looked I could not find one that had been missed.

The cicadas sang their subterranean song, the heat flowed like a river, at intervals all the dry maize stalks crackled softly. I was glad of the sound – it meant that a cool breeze, however faint, was blowing from the sea.

These are only some of the things I saw and thought about on my way to Kovalevsky's tower. And always the sea was beside me, playing like molten lapis-lazuli – the splendid sea, an abyss of coolness and soothing sound.

I reached Kovalevsky's tower when the heat was beginning to abate. Several houses surrounded by gardens stood on the cliffs. All the doors and windows were broken, and the gardens overgrown with tall dry weeds.

The one I chose had a timbered turret. A spiral staircase led to the top. It was undamaged. By some miracle, so were the balcony door and the glass of the only window in the tower room. Most important of all, the floor boards were intact.

The *dacha* was one of five, all uninhabited save by grey lizards and swallows.

I decided to settle down in the tower room. I felt as though I were in a lighthouse.

Rarely have I experienced such complete freedom, such a sense of being on my own to live as I please, of being at once a Robinson Crusoe and a hermit, the master of my time and of all the days to come. As for the everyday tasks and domestic chores that people usually find a burden, to me they seemed a light and even pleasant occupation.

I broke up dry wormwood and made a splendid big besom for sweeping the house.

Before dark I went down to the beach and gathered armfuls of dry, soft, matted seaweed, making sure that it was properly weathered and had lost its medicinal smell. It made excellent bedding for sleeping on the floor.

It is well known that, the fewer possessions a man has, the dearer they are to him, the more closely bound up with his life and the more important to him in all circumstances.

I unpacked my rucksack. With a feeling of thankfulness I took out my wick-lamp and a small bottle of spirit, two packets of tobacco, rusks, groats, saccharine, tea made of grated carrots, coarse red salt and a few other foodstuffs. At the bottom of the sack were a sailor's vest, an exercise book, a bottle of ink made

from indelible pencil, and several books. Anything else I would have to find on the spot, in the sea or the steppe.

I had also brought fishing lines and a large supply of silvered hooks. Odessa fishermen believed that sea fish take silvered hooks in preference to bronze or black. Personally, I thought this was sheer prejudice but, at the Sixteenth Station fishing village, it had enabled me to barter hooks for a large bottle of cloudy sunflower oil; ever since I had felt like Croesus.

I spent my first night in a restless but pleasant state between sleep and wakefulness. I slept, and yet I clearly heard the waves, the cicadas, the shuffling of the sand on the dunes and the soft creaking of an old electric wire which swung day and night from a post near the iron gate.

Sometimes all the sounds ceased abruptly and, after a few moments, a sigh came from the steppe as though some huge beast had settled down more comfortably to sleep.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them again a moment later a shadowy blue light filled the room up to the ceiling. It was the same colour as the sky beyond the window – I could see it as a great, smooth, hazy abyss. Crimson banks of cloud were forming in its blue. It must have been close on dawn but this did not at once occur to me and I continued to doze, waking every ten minutes or so, every time surprised to see the room emerging, as on a photographic print, in ever clearer and sharper detail out of the gloom.

Morning finally came when a small bird settled on the balcony rail and cheeped:

'Wasps sleep, wasps sleep, wasps sleep, don't sleep!'

'Don't sleep, don't sleep!' he repeated insistently, and the yellow tuft on his head lit up like a feathered flame in the first rays of the sun.

The sun, as it rose over the enormous spaces of the earth, looked much too large to shed its first light upon the single tiny wool-tuft of a crest on the head of a small bird.

I got up and went down to the sea to bathe. The cliffs were dangerously steep, in places almost sheer.

Later on I climbed through the trap in the verandah floor and underneath found a rusty spade and many other highly necessary things – a hammer, a pile of bent nails, a coil of wire and a large tin labelled 'Monpensier-Landrin'.

All these things I took and found very handy – just the job, as they say. And such is human forgetfulness that, within a week, I felt sure that I could not have held out even for a day without them. What, for instance, could I have used instead of the tin to fetch water from the spring that trickled from under the tamarisk bush on the cliff? And how, without the hammer, could I have flattened the lead for my plummet?

But next to the tin, the most precious find was certainly the spade.

Working at leisure, I spent three days digging a narrow pass through the steepest cliff and cutting steps in it – a sort of earthen stairway to the sea.

I enjoyed this 'earthy', trench-digging work. Where the spade cut it, the clay shone like polished amber. And in the cuts I discovered the unbelievably tough, long roots of some plant which showed an inch and a half above ground.

Everything was wonderful. But best of all was my staggering discovery that very first morning, that this whole dry coast with its thorns, dunes, golden gorse, its winds and sandy beaches and piles of seaweed, its sky and its clouds – the whole of that hot, lilac-coloured shore belonged to no one, or rather, it belonged to me alone.

I met no one for a week.

If I felt like it I could dig a remarkable cave in the cliffs. Or dam the spring and make a pool. Or stack driftwood, fishing floats and old boat frames grey with salt, into pyramids on the beach. Or cut branches of thuya, spread them on the floor and enjoy the smell of resin. There was no one to stop me.

This I ended by doing. My dwelling developed chance but interesting accretions. In the deserted houses round it I found an iron lantern, an hour glass and a Chinese sunshade. All these things I took to my room.

The days passed slowly. The sun was in no hurry.

Time slowed down, holding its breath, as though wishing it could stop.

But I knew that the dawn would bring a new day like the one before – so exactly like it that all the days of that week appeared to me as a single never-ending day.

I got used to the hot continuity of that endless day (the nights seemed only to be a break from the merciless daylight), to its monotonous droning, as of a copper string vibrating deep in the earth, to the molten air losing its transparency and clouding like frosted glass, and to the uneven blue of the sky as it deepened or paled under the pressure of the wind.

They say it's good for one sometimes to live alone.

From my own experience of life, I knew that there are many forms of solitude. I won't enumerate them all, but I know there is the solitude you can feel in a crowd, or in a forest, and the solitude that goes with grief, and there is also solitude at sea, which often borders upon a state of silent spiritual exaltation.

This silent state is positively hostile to talk. You want to be silent. And anyway, what can you say in your commonplace words when your dark body, overheated by the day, is suddenly lassoed and refreshed by the most gentle foam whipped up by the evening surf and wind? It melts on you, tingling on your skin with bubbles of sweet-smelling air, its touch as soft and cool as a breeze from those islands where, to this day, perhaps, virgin goddesses of bronze lie sleeping in the earth.

Or its touch may remind you of a girl's hair, damp after bathing.

In that solitude at sea, that face to face encounter with its murmuring expanse, there is always present a sense, if not of immortality, at any rate of the longevity which is the gift of the sea to man.

I spent all day on the beach, until sunset. Often I fell asleep in the shadow of a great rock. I read books a line at a time and I spent hours on end watching the scrolls of the flying clouds. It seems that one of the components of happiness is a state of unconcern, of freedom from even the most trifling of cares.

This must be true, for I was happy then. Pure, primordial, unadulterated light descended upon earth, and I quite forgot that such immense and gratuitous peace of mind is – according to superstition – never enjoyed with impunity.

Needless to say, retribution came.

I lay on the beach, looking through half shut eyes at spheres of many-coloured flame – they revolved before me in a sort of lilac void. I was trying to work out whether that void was merely the air over the sea, or if the sky had shed its violet blackness, to glitter for a while in silver and pale gold.

While I was reflecting upon this, from the top of the tall cliff came the faint sound of a human cry. I turned, and on the edge of the serene blue sky saw a man waving his cap. He held a small creature by the hand. The creature wore a faded red smock and hesitantly waved an arm as thin as a straw.

'Hullo!' shouted the man. 'Glad to see you in good health, Konstantin Grigoryevich! Come up here a moment.'

My heart sank. Hadn't I known all along that someone would get at me in my retreat and shatter to dust that rarest dream in which I had been living all these days? Even the friendly 'Hullo' rang false and vulgar amidst the harsh heat of the Sarmatian plain, the rustling of its grasses and the sound of the waters of the Pontus.

Reluctantly I rose and started up the cliff, while I tried to guess who the man was and what he could want of me.

'Good for you!' he was shouting. 'Hermit! Recluse! Alexander Selkirk! Simon Stylites! Jean-Jacques Rousseau!'

I climbed on, seething, silent for fear of letting out a string of curses at the man who stood on the verge of the rusty earth and the wonderful intensity of the sky and made fun of me.

'Odysseus! Miklukho Maklaï! Sea Wolf! Iphigenia in Tauris! Great Mute!'

I looked up at last, to have it out with the clown, and recognised Vasya Reginin. He was holding his six-year-old daughter, Kira, by the hand and laughing.

'Admit it was a good joke – playing the fool on the shores of

that sea celebrated by Academician Aïvazovsky![29] You were furious of course! It's a miracle I've found you. Torelli said you were somewhere here, near Kovalevsky's tower.'

The little girl was holding on to her father's arm and frowning up at me, her eyes an intense dark blue.

'Come to my villa,' I suggested. 'Well, how are things in town? Has anything happened?'

'Nothing much,' he replied, and all of a sudden there were tears in his eyes. They filled, then a few drops ran down his cheeks and fell on his crumpled, washed-out shirt.

'Daddy! You mustn't!' the child said sternly. 'It's all right, I'll stay here, I'm not frightened.'

Wiping his eyes with a handkerchief full of holes, Reginin told me that his wife was ill with typhus, in bed, delirious, and he, being at his wits' end and in complete desperation, had brought me the child because there was nowhere he could leave her in town. He couldn't keep her in the same small room as her mother, he had no friends in Odessa, and so. . . . The child's mouth drooped and her lips trembled.

'It's all right,' she said again. 'I'll stay here with Uncle. . . .'

'Uncle Kostya,' he prompted her. 'Stay, my darling. As soon as Mummy's better, I'll come for you. You will be staying on here for quite some time, won't you?' he asked me.

I was taken aback.

'Yes,' I said. 'Of course. I'll stay as long as necessary.'

'Well then, stay, my kind little heart.' He bent down and kissed the child's head. 'Be good and do what Uncle Kostya tells you. He's our great friend.'

He shook my hand and muttered without looking at me:

'I'll be off then. She's all by herself. She's delirious.'

He turned and went, and I stood bewildered, alone with the little girl on the great hot empty plain. I didn't even notice that Reginin had brought nothing for the child. Not even the smallest bundle of clothes. All she had was what she stood in. I was watching him walk away when I felt her small hot sweaty hand take me by the finger.

'Let's live like in a game,' she said.

Whatever she meant by it, life in the steppe did indeed from that moment become like a game – something between waking and dreaming.

From that day, fear for the life of that creature, fragile as a dragonfly, held me by the throat and by the heart and never let go of me until at last Reginin sent Torelli to fetch her – but that, as I remember, was not for a full three weeks.

I lived in a state of fear, despair, compassion and tenderness. All these feelings merged into one for which there is no name. At times it weakened, at others even such a trifling thing as pulling a thorn out of a thin, trembling finger flooded me with pain.

But the fact was that I had this small, trusting life on my hands and I had to pull myself together – especially as I had very little food left, no soap and, except for my bedraggled leather jacket, nothing with which to cover the child. And the nights were already getting colder, and more and more often there was a smell of autumn in the room at dawn.

I still don't know how I survived those days without turning grey. I was afraid of everything – the sun (I was always imagining she had sunstroke or heatstroke), the cliffs (how easily she could slip and fall to her death, and how I blessed the steps I had cut in the hard clay), the cold nights (she was sure to catch a chill), storms, and winds, and hunger (I reckoned we had food for only seven days).

All my books and hours of contemplation and happy thoughts were as though they had never been. I suppose because of my terror I failed in those first few days even to notice that the child was forever helping me – sweeping the house and the garden with the wormwood besom, gathering sticks and dry weeds for firewood and fetching water from the spring. True, she was so careful not to spill a drop that it took her an hour to bring it home.

She seldom asked me anything, she preferred to work things out for herself.

She almost never cried. Yet one day when a stone broke off the

cliff and fell, cutting her foot, she sobbed as desperately as a child abandoned on a heath at night. She hung on to my neck and trembled all over, while I washed the blood off and tied her foot with a clean rag.

I knew, of course, that she was not crying because of her wounded foot but because of the intolerable grief accumulated in her life over the past days.

The most terrible part of it was not to be able to bury her hot, tear-wet face in her mother's breast and, sobbing and whimpering, realise that in all the world there was only one person who could give her the whole of her tenderness and love and protection, and that person her mother.

Her mother lay sick in Odessa. Her mother might even be dead. But she mustn't think of that or she herself would die. Both of them – she and her mother – were now regretting every hour they had ever spent apart. It was an hour less in which to love each other and an hour nearer to the black incomprehensible void that people called death.

I was convinced that this was exactly how she felt, and I could think of nothing I could do to make her laugh, however seldom. Occasionally she smiled, but I knew it was only to reassure me.

We had to live of course. We lived hard but I was too busy to notice.

I had so many cares, I couldn't even count them.

To start with, washing. We bathed in the sea. But after coming out of that great wash-bowl, our faces spattered with stinging salt, we had to use the fresh but icy water from the spring.

We had no soap; we rubbed our hands and faces with sand. But after a few days I noticed that a strip of limestone at the bottom of the cliff was marbled with bluish petrified silt.

I had childhood recollections of 'keel' soap. It lathered beautifully in sea-water and it was made of some kind of blue Crimean clay. I can even remember the label of the Kharchenko soap-factory in Sebastopol, with its drawing of an anchor and of a bushy-whiskered gentleman, the manufacturer who had bestowed upon mankind the blessings of keel soap.

I scraped off a few lumps of the blue clay and tried rubbing it on my wet hands. It covered them with slime and when I washed it off the skin underneath was perfectly clean.

'It's keel!' I called to Kira.

'Keel, keel, keel!' she called back, shouting for the first time and hopping on her good leg.

Kira collected keel, soaked it, kneaded it like dough, cut it up into small cakes and put them to dry on the beach. Then at last, with infinite care, I washed my shirt and Kira's only dress, and we dried them on the sand.

True, the red dress developed patches of pure grey, and a few holes, but to make up for this it smelt of the sea for a long time.

I was so emboldened by the experiment that I took a few bars of keel and walked with Kira to Sixteenth Station, in the hope of bartering our home-made soap for food.

The first person to whom I offered it – a young fisherwoman grandly named Clarissa – giggled, stared at me with deep reproach, and said:

'Who d'you take me for? Are you pulling my leg? That's just ordinary keel. It's as common as sea water. But I will say your little daughter is as pretty as a peach.'

I explained who Kira was.

'Wait here,' Clarissa ordered. She wiped the sweat off her face with her short, torn skirt, went off to the kitchen garden and came back with a sack full of tomatoes, egg-plants, carrots, peppers and two bunches of grapes.

'All right, just to oblige you, I'll have your keel. And you take this lot and keep the sack.'

I began to thank her.

'What's all that about?' she asked, surprised. 'You crazy? I'm just off to see my Dad, he's fishing off Sanzheyka Cape, but I'll be back in a fortnight. Come and see me. Let's be friends. Don't forget. I know where you're staying – next to Kovalevsky's tower.'

She held out her small rough hand and I had an urge to keep it in mine. Laughing, she pulled it away.

'Don't you try anything on. Or I might take you at your word. Off you go, and look back only once. Just to be polite.'

I went off. I looked back once, saw her laughing eyes and teeth, and decided not to come back.

Somehow, after only a few days, things began to settle down. I found I could read again and, as we sat on the beach, I began to tell Kira stories.

You could not have called them fairytales. No indeed, they were true stories suggested by some incident or other and in no way divorced from reality. I'll give an example.

Playing on the sand, Kira was always finding bits of bottle-glass rolled smooth by the sea. She mistook them for precious stones. She could not believe that they were nothing but plain glass, the kind that littered every waste lot on the outskirts of Odessa.

She was partly right. If glass were as scarce as diamonds, it would be worth its weight in gold.

One day she asked me, 'Where do people dig for glass?' and I had to explain that they didn't dig for it but made it from sand. I began telling her all about it and after half an hour realised to my horror that I was telling it all wrong.

I told her how the one and only seed of a very rare black tulip was sealed inside a glass ball and shipped to Holland, and how that tiny seed caused a war among the flower-growers, and how the war ended only because a boy of two wandered away unnoticed by his nanny who was gossiping, and picked the flower grown from the seed, while the sentry, set to watch it, was hiding behind his striped sentry box, trying to light his pipe in the wind. I told her that many years later Dutch women put up a statue to that boy for saving them from a fratricidal war, for as soon as the unique flower was destroyed there was no longer any reason to fight, and the statue shows the boy tearing the regal black tulip to pieces in a strange childish frenzy.

I never noticed the point at which my story had turned into fiction, and was only brought back to earth by Kira's first and highly practical comment:

'Tulips grow from bulbs, not seeds. We had one at home. And

if you picked it, it came up again the year after. But those naughty Dutchmen didn't know that. They had their silly war all for nothing.'

She thought it over, gave a sigh, and added:

'Fancy flower-growers not knowing!'

I blushed. Not even as a child had I ever been so blatantly caught out in a piece of make-believe. Kira was watching me with narrowed, laughing eyes.

Of course the flower-growers could not have started their war over a tulip seed. At best, they must have started it over a bulb.

Ever since, I have kept firmly to the unwritten law of fairytales and fiction – that every fairystory, even the most unlikely, must have some basis in fact.

Every two or three days we walked to Dry Estuary, about three miles away. There I sat Kira down in the meagre shadow of the dry acacia bushes on the bank, while I waded out to some flat stones and fished for bullheads. This had nothing to do with fishing as recreation. Bullheads were our only fish food.

They swam in shoals in the waters of the estuary. I set myself a minimum of forty to catch each time.

While I fished, Kira sat uncomplainingly in the shade and tried to count the bullheads I caught. She could count only up to ten so for every ten bullheads she put down one empty cockle shell on the ground beside her. When there were four cockleshells she gave me a shout. If I caught any more after that, I counted them myself.

Kira liked her occupation. But her other reason for sitting still and uncomplaining was that the slightest movement would have brought her out of her wretched little patch of shadow into the blazing August sun.

After a while it occurred to us that it would be much less trouble and more pleasant to fish in the late afternoon. Best of all we enjoyed walking home over the endless beaches at sunset, following the very edge of the surf where the sand hardened for a moment after every wave. It was good to walk into the boundless

evening haze, while high above it glowed the pink and gold petal of a single cloud.

I had very little flour left. I baked some unleavened flat cakes and then I had none. Icy terror gripped my heart.

I went to Sixteenth Station to see Clarissa but she was still away, staying with her father, and when I asked her neighbour, an elderly fisherman, if he had any flour to sell, he only laughed.

I was turning to go when he stopped me.

'Just a minute.' He took me by the shirt sleeve and fingered the stuff. 'What's this shirt you're wearing? Isn't it English?'

As it happened, it was. I had bartered some rationed tea in the market for an English army khaki shirt.

'What about it?' I asked.

'I'll tell you what,' he said mysteriously. 'Go into the steppe and take the road to Klein-Liebenthal. When you come to a wild pear tree by the roadside, you'll see a gully to your right. Go down into the gully and you'll find a little path. Follow that path and it will take you to a little steam mill – the whole place is no bigger than my hut. There the miller will give you five pounds of flour for that shirt you've got on.'

'It sounds an awful lot,' I said doubtfully.

'He's a very unusual miller,' the fisherman said with the same air of mystery. 'Go along. You'll see for yourself. You haven't heard what's new in politics, by the way? We live like moles here, lucky if we see a paper once a month.'

We set out for the mill that very day.

I should not of course have taken Kira, but I was afraid of leaving her alone.

Dust eddied on the road. We had to keep to the road or we would miss the pear tree and the gully. The incandescent powdered clay burnt our feet even through the soles of our shoes.

Kira walked slowly and began to limp. I picked her up. Panting, she wound her arms, as brown as a gipsy's, round my neck.

I looked round in misery. There was not a patch of shade between me and the horizon, unless you count the brief strokes of

telegraph poles with broken wires. Several times we took a short rest in their shadow. All around us, the drought-stricken plain blazed white.

Never once did Kira complain. She kept quiet, resting her chin on my shoulder and gazing wearily at the steppe. Out there, two grey oxen advanced, bent under the yoke. Their tongues lolled almost to the ground. They panted heavily and often stopped. The driver shouted at them in a voice of tearful despair and struck their flanks with a crooked stick. The stick left marks on their sweating hide, like Assyrian cuneiform characters.

Under the pear tree we rested for a long time. Its leaves rustled in the wind like hard wings of beetles.

At long last, at the end of the dry limestone gully, we reached the mill, walked into the yard surrounded by high walls, collapsed in their shadow, and there sat in a kind of daze for an hour, or it may have been two.

The yard was empty. A tin chimney smoked on the tiled roof and from somewhere came the soft hissing of steam.

Then the 'unusual' miller came out, an old man, flour all over him, with an old-fashioned little beard *à la* Chekhov and a pince-nez. The lenses were thick with white finger-marks.

He stopped in front of us, gave us a long look and, without a word, went off to fetch a jug of cold water. We drank, closing our eyes, feeling the freshness flow into us, right down to our finger-tips.

He watched us, silent and impassive, waiting for us to finish.

'Are you the miller?' I asked.

'No, I'm the vine-grower!'

'Why don't you ask what we've come for?' I thought the man must be a lunatic.

A slow, crafty smile lit up his eyes. 'Because I know what you want.'

'Then, can you do it?' I pointed to my shirt. 'That's all I've got.'

'And what will you wear to go back? The heat is fifty degrees in the sun.'

'I'll sit here until it's cooler. I've got another shirt at home, an old one.'

'Then why aren't you wearing it?'

'I don't know,' I answered listlessly. 'I'm tired. I've had no bread for four days.'

'And the girl?'

'She still had some rusks until last night.'

'Wait here.' He went off again, and stayed away a long time.

It was the hottest hour of the day – I could tell from the dull droning in the steppe, like the buzzing of millions of beetles caught in honey.

Instead of the old man an old woman, also covered in flour, came out and brought us six tomatoes, a pinch of salt in a rag, and two chunks of newly baked bread. We ate it all up in a few minutes, down to the last crumb, and immediately fell asleep.

I awoke when shadows, as long as wasted arms, lay on the grey earth. The sun was going out in the dust. A faint coolness drifted from the gully; it even seemed to smell of water.

The old woman stood beside me.

'Get up,' she said. 'And wake up the girl. It's bad for you to sleep at sunset. You'll catch a fever.' She put down a heavy sack of flour on the ground beside me. 'That's for you from Kazimir Petrovich.'

'Thank you!'

I jumped up, undid my shirt and started pulling it over my head.

'Don't,' said the woman. 'It won't ruin us. You'll pay us back later. The idea of it, bless your heart!'

I surprised myself by hugging her and kissing her hand. I wanted to thank the old man as well, but she said he was out. Where could he have gone on this empty plain as flat as a giant dish?

Kira kept quiet for a long time, still only half awake. We crossed a farm cart on the road, loaded with two sacks of corn for the mill. Evidently because of the heat the mill worked at night.

Then Kira felt the soft, cooling dust of the road under her scorched heels and laughed.

'Sparrows have their bath in the dust,' she said. 'I've seen them. I wish I could, too, but I don't suppose you'd let me.'

She was teasing me, her eyes crinkled with laughter.

Slowly one hot day succeeded another but neither Reginin nor Torelli came for us. I was getting seriously worried about Kira's mother. Kira too began to fret and begged me to take her home, while I did everything to avoid the subject and to look calm and cheerful.

Finally I gave in and had even fixed the date of our return when a stupid accident upset our plans.

The fact is that, although I had stolen firewood in Arcadia with Yasha Lifshitz, I am not a thief, I never was and I doubt if I ever will be.

All the same I went to Sixteenth Station to commit another theft – not for firewood this time, but for tomatoes.

I had nothing left to barter for food. I had lied to the miller about having a spare shirt – why, I don't know. The faint hope of Clarissa once more taking pity on the child and giving us a few vegetables, I had to give up. To begin with, she was still away, and besides I realised that in view of such feminine hopes of me as she might harbour, I ought not to put myself in her debt.

I set out on my tomato raid at night and needless to say without telling Kira. The result was farcical. Being short-sighted, I stumbled in the dark, the old watchman known as Budka-Khala-budka yelled, fired, and hit me in the back, below the shoulder blades, with a charge of dirty rock salt.

Appalled by the success of his markmanship, he then presented me with a basket of choice tomatoes. It turned out that I had suffered for nothing.

The salt had fanned out in the wind and not hit me hard. All the same the pain was infernal. For two hours I dabbed the cuts with water from the spring, beating myself over the shoulder with a wet rag. I had nothing to use as a bandage so for two days I sat barebacked in the shade, waiting for the cuts to heal. I told Kira I had scratched myself scrambling down the cliff.

A few days later Torelli and Izya Livshitz came to fetch us.

Torelli came for Kira. Her mother had recovered and was only crying with hunger and sulking because her dark thick hair had been shaved off. Izya came to tell me it was time for me to go back to *The Seaman*.

I returned to Odessa as regretfully as I used to go back to school after a short summer of freedom. I was homesick for the Sixteenth Station, for my beach, and if I hadn't been ashamed, I would have had a good cry in private.

That was the end of this brief episode. Though perhaps it really ended later, at the book fair at the writers' club in Moscow in 1947.

Reginin came up to me with a tall, calm, reserved young woman and said:

'Here you are! That's Kira, the one on whose account you got shot with salt in the backside.'

Kira blushed and held out her hand.

'Do you remember how we lived at Fountain?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she replied uncertainly. 'Well, to be honest, only just. And I'd quite forgotten your face.'

Feeling, for some reason, a little put out I asked, for something to say:

'What are you doing now?'

'I've taken my degree, I'm doing post-graduate research. I'm married. I'd like you to meet my husband. Will you wait a moment?'

She moved away. I waited a few minutes but there was no sign of her. Then I left the club, and could never afterwards explain to myself why I had taken care to slip out unnoticed.

20

Goodbye My Odessa

It was my second autumn in Odessa.

Of all the autumn seasons I remembered, autumn in Odessa seemed to me the most luminous. This was true not only of the steppe, the dachas, the Fountains with their deserted gardens, but of the city itself.

I came across an exact description of autumn in Odessa in a poem I read somewhere:

The autumn air is fine and full of danger,
There is a different rhythm, a different round of days,
The cherished city is more beautiful in autumn,
Its sound more gentle. . . .

In the morning, when the streets were still in shadow, they smelt of dying stocks. Yet I could never find stocks growing in the squares or gardens. Apparently what I smelt were simply the morning shadows, or the freshly watered roadways, or perhaps the faint breeze from the open sea. It blew from the side of Big Fountain lighthouse, over the melon fields where it gathered the sweetish smell of withering stalks and leaves, filtered with difficulty through the dense growth of trees and bushes along French Boulevard and meandered on through the sea-side suburbs, where tomatoes ripened and melon-rinds dried on the roofs of the fishermen's huts.

All this gave the wind its flower-like, clean, refreshing smell. The air was truly 'fine and full of danger' – not only because you could catch a cold but because, having breathed it, you could not

stop wishing that autumn would go on for ever in Odessa with its soft conversation and laughter in the streets.

In southern towns, people are less shy of the street than they are in the north, and because of this the streets are more exuberant and lyrical, ready at the drop of a hat to become the stage for human kindness, wit and curiosity.

I have said that the autumn in Odessa is luminous.[30] I came across the word as a boy (Tyutchev speaks of 'luminous evenings') but its exact meaning escaped me for a long time.

Only in old age did I discover that it describes the steady, serene effulgence of the sun's rays, particularly in the evening and in autumn.

Autumn in Odessa was luminous in the fullest sense of the word. A quiet, pinkish light filled the streets. It was pinkish partly because of the perpetual haze, and partly because the sun hung lower and lower above the horizon, and from early morning took on the reddish tints of sunset.

But that year, the bright autumn weather soon gave way to fog. The light faded out. This melancholy change coincided with the unexpected closing down of *The Seaman*.

Allegedly the Sailors' Union could not afford to publish it. But the money could have been found – the paper was exceptionally popular. The real trouble was that the official editor, Pokhodkin, a retired naval captain – grey-moustached, humming with indecision, terrified of all journalists and of his own paper - was always looking for some way of getting rid of it, and eager for any excuse to close it down.

On the day it closed, he could think of nothing better than to hold a wake for it at his villa in Arcadia.

We came to the party in a state of nervous irritation and subconsciously determined to have a row. All we needed was a grievance, however trifling. Naturally, we found one, and it was not so frivolous as all that.

As soon as we came in, we were further exasperated by the faint but disgusting stench of kerosine in all the rooms.

It turned out that the Captain's hobby was rearing chickens.

He proudly showed us the row of incubators on the verandah, a smelly oil-lamp crackling under each one.

In love with sailing, ports, and the magic of the high seas, we took the Captain's chickens and incubators as an insult to our dreams and to the whole seafaring profession.

Instead of proposing the first toast, Bagritsky declaimed a furious tirade against sham sailors, philistines who turned their back to the ocean, on the song of the wind in the shrouds, sweet as the murmur of space in a sea-shell, over the whole of that glorious, unpredictable way of life, and escaped into the stale and stuffy world of incubators.

Next, Ivanov jumped up, overturning his chair, and shouted, spluttering with rage:

'Comrades! That shark in naval uniform,' (his shaking finger pointed at Pokhodkin) 'that wind bag, that old sack of straw, has shut down our wonderful paper! Why? So that he can hatch his rickety chickens to sell in the market! This is more than a disgrace. It's an infamy! It calls for retribution! Break the incubators! Smash them to smithereens, to dust, to smoke! I alone will answer for everything!'

The amount we had drunk was not enough to explain the fact that within minutes nearly all the incubators were broken and smashed. Clouds of greasy soot poured from the oil-lamps. Pokhodkin, ripping the gold buttons off his tunic together with the cloth, was beating his breast and wailing penitently:

'That's right! I've deserved it! I confess!'

His wife, a stumpy little woman with tight red curls all over her head, grabbed our hands, twisted our fingers in impotent fury and hissed:

'Scoundrels! I'll have you all locked up. You won't get away with it.'

No one knows how it would have ended but for the direct intervention of the sea. The villa stood near the cliffs. The cliffs that evening were being pounded by a storm. From somewhere on the cliffs came the crash and rumble of an explosion; the house shuddered and swayed; all the window-glass flew out, ringing

merrily. The Captain raised his arms to heaven and roared:

'Quiet! No panic! A mine has exploded on the cliffs. Serves me right! I've deserved it! That clucking hen,' he stamped at his wretched wife, 'knocked all the stuffing out of me.'

Immediately after the explosion we scattered. We ran, we could not get away fast enough from that hateful house, gaping with all its broken windows and still belching soot and the stench of kerosine.

By the beginning of the winter I was all alone in Black Sea Street.

So long as the bright autumn weather held, the lodge was warm and almost cosy but when the heavy rains began, it sucked up water like a sponge. Dark stains spread along the walls. The rooms smelt of lime and whitewash, and hordes of sickly, slow-moving spiders crept out of nowhere.

I had to move to dry quarters. But where?

It was Lucienna, the former typist from *The Seaman,* who saved me. She had joined an arts and crafts team and was sewing unbleached linen hats for ladies. The team would take on any work so long as it was paid: making hats, clogs, cigarette lighters, sewing brassieres, painting sign-boards for government institutions and plywood posters for cinemas, as well as manufacturing a mysterious powder which served quite well as a substitute for yeast.

The team had set up its workshop on the ground floor of a former dressmaking establishment, Allschwang & Co. The first floor, where the cutting and fitting rooms had been, stood empty and cold. Lucienna suggested that I should move in as a squatter.

The team had no objection – anyone living in the house would make it less likely that their workshop would be burgled.

I moved to Allschwang's. I locked up the lodge and took the key, to keep until the first warm days of spring.

I set up my *bourzhouika* in the fitting room, adapting the chimney to the ventilator. I slept on a large looking-glass door which had been taken off its hinges; I laid it on cases of wood-

shavings. Several times a night my worn old mattress slipped off the mirrored surface and tipped me out on to the stone floor.

I had taken a job with another paper, *The Lathe*. What I mostly remember of it is a dingy office, as dark as a cellar, and a crowd of messenger boys with nothing whatever to do. Kurs, the editor – the kindest of men (though he played the ruthless commissar) – had gathered all these urchins and given them bread-cards.

Totally unemployed, they played snap or noughts and crosses all day long, but at least they didn't starve.

It was a dismal winter. The harbour was frozen. Beyond the lighthouse, the Bulgarian ship, *Varna,* lay icebound. It had brought a cargo of olives; the olives were frozen, too.

We had no ships of our own yet. Two old steamers had been towed from the ships' cemetery to the repair-yards and were being put into shape. One was called *Dimitry,* the other *Pestel.*

The kind of job it was can be judged from the fact that three hundred rivets were needed for the *Dimitry* alone, and in two full months not a single rivet had been found in Odessa. *The Lathe* printed a letter on this subject from one of the dockyard workers; it appeared in bold type under the reproachful heading: 'No, Comrades, this is not the way to achieve happiness!'

I was beginning to feel that my time in Odessa had come to an end; I had got all I could out of it. I had had this sort of intuition several times before, and it had never deceived me – it meant that it was time to move. But there was not the slightest prospect of it so far – I had neither money nor a job elsewhere.

One grey, miserable winter day, Izya Livshitz burst into the office, past the little boys playing their exciting games around the stove. He announced that *The Seaman* had been revived and the first new issue would be out next week.

Apparently, some former members of the sailors' revolutionary underground, together with the Bolsheviks, had managed to have it put on its feet again.

This was just as well. Ivanov missed his paper so much that he had taken to his bed and not uttered a word for two months. Marina worked herself to the bone keeping him and the two

children. 'A lunatic,' she said of her husband, but with tears of pride in her big dark eyes. 'You know what he says? "A paper like our *Seaman* cannot die." '

Izya and I hugged each other for joy. Kurs came storming from his office in a rage. All the little boys scattered in terror.

Kurs shouted that he wouldn't let me go – it was sabotage, wrecking tactics, a stab in the back, in fact it was counter-revolution. Izya and I only laughed. In the end, he shrugged his shoulders and resigned himself.

How many times have I not learned by experience that the same good thing never happens twice! One should expect happiness, of course, but not the happiness one has already had. Yet such is human nature that we always wait for a miraculous repetition – a resurrection of our past which, embellished by time, seems to us unique and wonderful.

I returned to *The Seaman,* but it was no longer the same. Something had changed. I couldn't put my finger on what the change was, but somehow the paper was a little dry, and life in the editorial office a little less exciting.

So I was delighted when Ivanov suggested that I should go for *The Seaman* on a tour of all the Black Sea ports between Odessa and Batumi. Seventy rivets having somehow been unearthed, the *Dimitry* was being sent on a cruise along the coast of the Caucasus. It was to be the first run of what, so far, was the only Soviet steamer, to places which had only recently been liberated from the Whites.

The *Dimitry* was to carry mines, foodstuffs for the Crimea, and sailors to reorganise the work in the newly-won, hungry and half-ruined ports.

She would also carry a few passengers, and two hundred speculators who were going to the Crimea to buy salt. No one in those days regarded this as strange.

Odessa's parting gift to me was a show such as perhaps no other city could have put on. This was the funeral of 'Sashka the Musician' whom Kuprin has described in his 'Gambrinus'.[31]

While I was in Odessa, I had taken to reading the newspapers

from the first to the last word – you never knew when you would run across some pearl of Odessan literary style.

I still remember a funeral notice as striking by its text as by its lay-out:

The mighty oak
KHAIM WOLF SEREBRYANNY
has fallen
and his orphaned branches bow
in deep anguish
Funeral procession to the 2nd Jewish cemetery starts at —, from—.

What could be more affecting than the thought of the 'mighty oak' Serebryanny – some hefty navvy who had breakfasted off a pound of suet and a bottle of vodka every morning of his life – and those 'orphaned branches', his children?

Thus it happened that one day I read in the *Odessa News* the announcement of the death of a certain Aaron Moyseyevich Goldstein (I think that was his name). No one would have paid any attention to it but for the words in brackets after the surname: '"Sashka the Musician" from the "Gambrinus" '.

Until then, I had believed that characters in fiction are nearly always fictitious. I could not imagine life and literature merging into one. So the announcement puzzled me.

I re-read 'Gambrinus'. It was as precise as the minutes of a meeting, and yet deeply moving and as picturesque as a summer evening in Odessa's Deribasov Street.

What then gave it that quality which I hesitated whether to call authenticity of art or a noble sensibility? Apparently it was the noble sensibility and humanity of Kuprin himself that endowed his story with the character of great art.

It was almost incredible to me that Sashka – the Sashka I had known since my childhood as the hero of a story – had actually been living next door, in the garret of an old Odessa house.

But I was privileged. I was to see with my own eyes the true ending of 'Gambrinus': the funeral of Sashka the Musician, life itself rounding off Kuprin's story.

The whole of working-class Odessa from the docks and the suburbs followed Sashka the Musician to the cemetery.

The black cart with the coffin was drawn by skinny horses who often stopped on the way, breathless and wheezing. Every time, the crowd waited patiently for them to recover; then, without any urging from the red-haired driver, they leaned on the traces and walked on a little further. Dull tears of age stood in the splendid eyes of the martyred beasts.

Lowengard, an old reporter from *The Seaman,* walked next to me. The funeral horses reminded him of an old gypsy romance, 'A pair of bays harnessed at dawn': sometimes, at the Gambrinus, Sashka had accompanied Vera the street-singer, nicknamed Cocaine, who sang it so movingly that many of the clients wept.

The red-haired driver smoked, and spat neatly into the roadway. His torn hat pulled over one eye, his whole seedy appearance spoke of how much life had changed since Sashka's day. 'Call it life when to shoe a single miserable devil of a horse costs you close on a million? A million in the old days would have bought you the whole district of Inner-Mills – apricots and gardens and carriages and horses thrown in!'

A large crowd followed the coffin. Old women waddled along, muffled in warm shawls – women who had known Sashka the Musician in the days when they were flashing young beauties. There were hardly any girls in the procession.

The women walked in a body, ahead of the men. It was etiquette among the poor of Odessa to let the women go in front ('That's Odessa for you – not some wretched, one-horse Vinnitsa!'). After them came Sashka's colleagues, grey with cold.

Near the entrance of the boarded-up Gambrinus, the procession stopped. The musicians took their instruments from under their threadbare coats, and the unexpected melody of a sad, old-fashioned love-song drifted over the silent crowd:

Not for me, oh not for me
Will come the spring. . . .

People in the crowd took off their hats, blew their noses,

coughed and wiped their eyes. Then a hoarse, deliberately hearty voice shouted from the back:

'Let's have Sashka's favourite!'

The musicians glanced at one another, nodded, and struck up a boisterous staccato tune:

Goodbye my Odessa,
Sweet Quarantine,
Tomorrow we're off
To far Sakhalin![32]

I was watching the crowd. All these people – fishermen, sailors, smugglers, stokers, dockers, navvies, a strong, rumbustuous Odessa breed – had once been regulars of the Gambrinus. What had become of them? 'Life has been hard on us,' elderly sailors humbly admitted. 'Life is not to be cheated, you have to be tough with it – lug it on your hump and stow it in the hold like a hundredweight sack. That's what we've been doing, but we haven't seen much happiness yet, and it doesn't look as if we shall, at our age. Look at old Sashka in his coffin, shrivelled as a monkey! Happiness is for the young. Youth at the helm, they say. Well, may they live in justice and freedom. We'll have done our bit towards it.'

Lowengard took me gently by the arm and said:

'It was I who took Alexander Ivanovich Kuprin to the Gambrinus. There he sat over his vodka, grinning and screwing up his Tartar eyes. And then suddenly, a year later, that story came out! I cried over it, you know. That's a real masterpiece of brotherly love, a pearl among the rubbish of our everyday life.'

It was the first I had heard of Lowengard having known Kuprin, but ever since I have thought that if Kuprin had lived long enough he would certainly have written about Lowengard.

A lonely, broken-down old man, Lowengard had one passion – the port of Odessa. He had often refused better paid jobs, and had always stuck to covering the port.

From morning till sunset, whatever the weather and the season, he slowly made his round of the docks, climbed aboard the ships and questioned the sailors about all the details of their trips. He

had perfect mastery of several languages, including modern Greek. With equal and exquisite courtesy he spoke to captains and layabouts, always removing his battered old hat.

The port knew him as 'The Chronicler'. In spite of the absurdity of his old-fashioned figure among the loud-mouthed population of the docks, no one ever laid a hand on him or allowed him to be harmed. In his way, he was their Sashka the Musician.

21

Gale Force Eleven

A cargo of floating mines for Sebastopol in her hold and two hundred speculators on deck, the *Dimitry* sailed.

Only Izya Livshitz came to see me off.

It was a fairly cold, still winter day. In place of yesterday's puddles, crusts of ice as thin as mica crackled on the breakwaters. Snow fluttered, so light that it seemed you could count all the snowflakes.

Seagulls beat the water as they took off, as though to warm their cold, red feet.

Standing by the dockside, the *Dimitry* listed heavily. She was smaller than she had seemed from the distance of the Boulevard. Hissing ominously, steam oozed from her every chink and the whole ship smelt like a bath or a laundry.

The deck was cluttered up with sacks and carpet-bags, and lying or sitting on them were the carpet-baggers – women muffled up to the eyes in shawls and men in boots smelling of tar.

I was put into a cabin for four in which we were eight. Three lay on the floor and one, a Volga boatman, sat on the washstand – it could not be used for washing anyway, as there was no water.

To keep him from tumbling down on top of us at night, we tied him with a towel to a clothes hook in the wall.

But the boatman never grumbled. He felt ill at ease among sailors and preferred to stay in the background. He and I were the only civilians – all the rest were in the Navy. The two youngest and I slept on the floor.

On our very first night out, my neighbour, a former midshipman, now the Captain of the Sanzheyka floating lighthouse, said to no one in particular:

'In case of trouble, I strongly urge our civilian comrades to stick close to us sailors.'

I let it pass, but the boatman nerved himself to ask:

'Do you think the journey will be dangerous?'

'Judging by all the signs,' the midshipman said with relish, 'the *Dimitry* is heading for a watery grave.'

He was ticked off sharply by the Commissar of the Nikolayevsk Port.

There was no sign of danger so far. We sailed in a light mist. Swaying gently, the panorama of the town, the dome of the Opera House and the Vorontsov Palace, then the Fountains and the familiar Kovalevsky Tower receded into the haze. The waves muttered softly in their everlasting chase.

We found boiling water in the galley and, sitting on the floor, drank tea with saccharine.

Towards nightfall the sound of the waves grew louder, but the smell of steam and smoke and the steady rolling of the ship were reassuring.

I fell sound asleep. How much later it was, I don't know, but when I woke up the lamp over the washstand was on, dim and distant as though a mile away, the boatman was swaying back and forth and clinging to the washbasin, my shoulder was being pounded against the cabin door and everything around was creaking and groaning. You could hear the *Dimitry* sighing heavily as she lurched into the water and with difficulty clambered out.

'Listen to that gale,' a sailor said disapprovingly. 'Only been blowing for an hour and it's reached Force Seven.'

The cabin, cramped and airless, gave sudden jerks, trying to throw us into a heap, and pulling us from side to side as though to wipe the floor with us.

The young midshipman half opened the door and looked out. The carpet-baggers had fled the deck and lay packed in a tight row on the floor of the narrow passage. Alone among them an old

Jew in a long frock coat stood upright, his shaking hands pressed against the walls.

Where that old man from the backwoods was going, no one could tell, but he looked wildly improbable on a creaking sea-going steamer, tossed by a storm at night.

'Why are you standing?' asked the midshipman. 'You'll get seasick. You ought to lie down.'

'Can't you see, sir, there's no room for me,' said the Jew.

The midshipman went out, shook the carpet-baggers awake and cleared a space for him.

'An Old Testament character from the time of the Flood,' he said, coming back.

I lay close to the wall and listened to the seas as they shook the steamer, pounding its thin metal side. I was growing uncomfortable. It was strange to realise that, four millimetres from my flushed face, mountains of icy water were galloping through the gloom as though possessed. And what gloom!

I glanced at the porthole. Impenetrable, as though subterranean, darkness lay beyond it, over the primaeval chaos of the unimaginably vast watery waste.

No one slept. Everyone listened. The *Dimitry* gave sharp cracks. It was hard to understand why the mouldering walls, floors and ceilings of the cabins hadn't flown to splinters under the strain of the tossing ship, which bent and loosened every screw, tie, rivet and bolt.

At each crack I looked at the sailors. They were calm, but they were chain-smoking. So was I, while trying to convince myself that there was more life left in the *Dimitry* than I, as an ignorant civilian comrade, could have supposed.

We were all waiting for the morning. But morning was frighteningly far off, beyond the thick darkness howling over half the world.

The tossing grew worse. The ship lay almost flat, now on one side, now on the other. More and more often the screw leapt clear of the water, and each time the *Dimitry* shook furiously and hummed with the strain.

'Couldn't a storm like that drive us ashore?' the Volga boatman, still clinging to his washstand, asked abruptly.

The sailors were contemptuously silent. Not until about ten minutes later did the grim but kindly Commissar reply:

'The wind has reached Force Ten. Of course, anything is possible. But I wouldn't pin my hopes to being blown ashore, if I were you. The further off we are from it, the better.'

'Why's that?' asked the boatman.

'Because near the coast the ship would certainly break her back on the waves. Or against the rocks. And there would be no survivors.'

And I who had been looking at my watch every ten minutes, waiting for the dawn and hoping that we might be driven to the North Crimean shore and find safety on its stony, barren soil!

In the middle of the night the midshipman got up and, putting on his boots and hooded leather jacket, said casually:

'I'll go and have a look.'

He came back soon, wet from hood to heels.

Tensely silent, we waited for him to speak.

'Speech is silver, silence is gold,' he said mockingly. 'Well, here it is. The deck is awash. Two of the four lifeboats have broken away. The gunwhale's bent. The gale is Force Eleven. But all this is nothing.'

'Nothing, is it?' the Commissar muttered, sitting down on his bunk. 'Well, go on. What else?'

'The forepeak is damaged, and we've sprung a leak.'

'Are the donkey engines working?' the Commissar asked quietly.

'Yes, they're managing so far. But the engine's packing up.'

'Are we moving?'

'That's the point, Comrade Commissar. We aren't pulling.'

'Drifting, are we?'

'Exactly, sir.'

'Drifting towards the Rumanian coast?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But that's where . . .' The Commissar grabbed at the upper

bunk and pulled himself up. 'I'll have a talk with the Captain.'

He went away. We were silent for a long time.

'The joke is,' said one of the sailors, 'that during the war the Germans laid a lot of mines along that coast – scattered handsome bouquets of them, as you might say. And there they still are. If we're driven on to them. . . .'

He didn't have to tell us. We knew what would happen.

The Commissar came back and, still in his leather coat, sat down and lit a cigarette.

The waves boomed and hissed, the whistling of the wind in the rigging grew shriller and shriller. The sound of it chilled your blood.

'We've sent an SOS.' The Commissar paused. 'But it won't do us any good. There are no ships in our ports. And no one will come from the Bosphorous in this storm, not even the *Superb*. So there we are.'

We sat in grim silence. From the corridor came the sound of water splashing from the deck over the raised thresholds.

So a day went by and, amidst the howling of the gale, night fell for the second time. The storm continued; it seemed as though it would not abate until the end of time.

On the third day we all fell into a kind of stupor. Everyone, even old sailors, looked exhausted.

On the fourth day I was sitting, eyes closed and hands pressed to the floor, counting the upward and downward swings of the ship. At moments they seemed less sharp and I hastily lit a cigarette. But the illusory lull was brief, and again my heart lurched as the cabin flew up and sank, leaning sideways, into an invisible void.

At last, terribly slowly, intermittently, as though hesitating, a sullen livid morning dawned beyond the porthole. The whistle in the rigging rose to a demented shriek.

The wind was a northeaster – 'the scourge of God', the sailors called it. From them I learnt that a northeaster blows for three, seven or eleven days.

The carpet-baggers in the corridor stirred and muttered hoarsely; tired women burst into tears. One old woman just

outside the door kept repeating the same prayer over and over again: 'Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us.' When the tossing became particularly violent she cut the prayer short and only whispered hurriedly: 'Have mercy, have mercy.'

For the first time, I decided to go on deck. According to the sailors, one felt much worse in the cabin than outside.

The Commissar came with me:

'You can't go alone. They won't let you on deck by yourself. Besides, you might be washed overboard.'

Water up to our ankles, in the nauseating smell of vomit, past the carpet-baggers lying prone on the wet floor and groaning, we reached the companionway which led to the upper deckhouse and the deck.

The Commissar leaned hard on the deck-house door. It flew open and a rush of air flung us outside.

Clutching at an ice-slick rope, I saw what in the dark cabin I had only imagined – a titanic, an unheard of storm. It filled me with an overwhelming sense of despair and of terrifying beauty.

A pitiful human dustmote rapidly losing the last of its warmth, I stood facing it – while the storm thundered and drove iron waves before it, hurled them into dark abysses, erupted at the swollen sky, rolled mountains of water and, rending the air, plastered us with sticky foam.

The *Dimitry*'s stern flew up to the clouds and sank deep into the water. Long, steep waves reared and swept the sea from side to side of the horizon; their crests ran before them, and in the furrows was revealed, in all its terrifying majesty, the churning of the leaden waters of that hurricane region we would have to cross in order to survive.

'Look!' the Commissar shouted.

I couldn't understand what he was pointing at.

'Look at all that vapour!'

Then I saw – between the howling waves, swift, angry jets of steam shooting from the grey-green water like the gunsmoke from a thousand guns.

Later, in the cabin, the Commissar told me that such jets appear whenever a warm sea is invaded by an ice-cold storm.

Then I saw the horizon in front of us blotted out and a gigantic wall of raging sea bearing down on us with a cosmic boom. The Commissar seized my arm and pulled me inside the deckhouse. 'Hold on!' he shouted.

Darkness filled the deckhouse. With a rending noise, the *Dimitry* rushed up the watery slope, then paused and, shuddering, sank into water up to the Captain's bridge. 'It's all over,' I said to myself. 'If only I can stop myself from screaming with terror!'

With a muffled groan, the ship rolled over on its side, and beyond the porthole, wide sheets of water cascaded from the deck, back into the sea.

'What was that?' I asked stupidly.

'Another two or three such seas and it's all up with us,' said the Commissar, looking at me with glazed, wide-open eyes.

But there were no more waves like that one. The sea still roared dementedly, but the *Dimitry* seemed to pitch a little less.

We recovered our breath and went back to the cabin. The wind was no longer shrieking but humming steadily in the rigging and the ship's funnel. There was a sudden lull in the violence of the gale.

The boatswain, his face scalded by the northeaster, looked into the cabin and said that the engine was pulling once again, and we were making headway, though slowly, against the storm.

The sailors cheered up. They even rummaged in their boxes and bags and got out their meagre rations.

I was blissfully chewing a piece of barley-bread when, through the noise of the sea and wind, there came the choking, spluttering wail of the ship's siren.

The sailors blenched and jumped up. For hundreds of miles around us there was nothing but the turbulence of the stormy sea. What could the siren mean?

Hastily buttoning up their greatcoats, they rushed up on deck. I followed. I prepared myself to see the end of the *Dimitry* and all that horror of slow disaster contained in the word 'shipwreck'.

But nothing terrible had happened. The sea still drove its mountainous waves. Some sailors were running along the quarterdeck, pulling on a rope.

'What was the siren for?' the Commissar shouted to them.

'We've sighted land! Cape Tarkhankut!' one of them called back.

The Commissar swore in astonishment and went up to see the Captain. I scrambled up the narrow, slippery companionway after him.

I had met the Captain in Odessa. He was an exceptionally thin and exceptionally serene old man with snow-white hair.

'Sorry about that,' he said. 'The mate was on watch with me, he sighted land and got so excited that he sounded the siren. Startled everybody. Still, it's excusable, I suppose. He'd never been in a storm like that before.'

'And you,' I asked, 'have you often been in such a storm?'

'Where? On the Black Sea?' He pulled back a corner of his hood to hear better.

'Yes.'

'About twenty times, perhaps,' he answered with a shy smile.

His grey, faded eyes watered in the wind and his hand shook on the gunwhale.

'It was easier before the war,' he said. 'But now the sea is spiked all over with mines. The gales have torn them from their moorings and set them adrift. So you never know when a mine will hit your bottom.'

The Commissar lowered his binoculars and said sheepishly: 'I can't seem to find the coast. Nothing but those blasted waves.'

'No, I don't suppose you can yet. It's still too far,' said the Captain. 'But have a look at the sky. Over there, just above the horizon – can you see a dark strip in the clouds? That's where the land is. It's a kind of reflection it throws up at the overcast.'

The chief engineer came up on the bridge, his angry face as red as a pepper.

'Aristarkh Petrovich, you can't do this,' he pleaded with the Captain. 'Go down to your cabin and rest. The wind is dropping.

The engine is pulling normally for the time being. It's suicide at your age to stand on the bridge for three days and three nights without sleep. The crew want to send a wireless message to complain about you to the management and to your wife.'

'That's as may be,' the Captain grinned. 'The wireless operator won't send anything without my permission. But I'll go and lie down for a bit. In three hours' time we'll be entering Karadzhi Bay.' He pointed at a small circle on the map. 'Here it is. Just north of Tarkhankut. We'll stay there and ride out the storm. Until then I think I'll get some sleep. You'll excuse me, Comrades.' He went to the companionway but turned back and asked the Commissar:

'Are they your men, that crew of six sailors we've got on board?'

'No.' The Commissar pricked up his ears. 'They're from Odessa. Why?'

'They're cut-throats, that's why. They pushed their way on board and refused to show their documents. One of them wears a silver anklet. You might check up on them.'

'I certainly will.'

'A bad lot. Riff-raff,' the chief engineer put in. 'Jailbirds in disguise. Armed from neck to navel. Lucky the storm knocked them out or they'd be raising hell.'

He went down. The Commissar and I spent a few more minutes with the mate who had replaced the Captain on watch.

We looked at the sky, pale-leaden in the east, and at the dark strip of cloud like a motionless trail of smoke. If that was a reflection of the land, we were still very far away from it.

We wished we could stay longer on the bridge, but the rules of naval courtesy forbade it so we went down.

Below, the cabins and gangways rang with excited voices. Everybody knew by now that we had sighted land, and that if we were being tossed less violently it was because that distant, blessed shore had already taken us under its wing and protected us from the icy northeaster.

In the middle of the night there came the long-drawn-out running rumble of the anchor-chain. The sound was repeated

twice: the *Dimitry* had cast anchor in Karadzhi Bay near Tarkhankut.

From the earliest times, Cape Tarkhankut has been held in ill repute by seafaring men. The sea around it is never calm, presumably because several crosscurrents meet at this point. The waters seethe around the Cape and the short but choppy crossing upsets passengers and exasperates the crew. In the days of sailing vessels so many ships were wrecked that the place was ominously known as the 'ships' graveyard'.

We stood at anchor. We rolled very gently, and at times even this mild rocking ceased. Then everyone sighed with relief.

I went out on deck. The wind lashed my face with pellets of snow. Iron darkness lay all around. In this gloom, very near but not inside the bay, the surf thundered for hundreds of miles to north and south. Like slow lightning, the lamp of the Tarkhankut lighthouse flashed on, swept the boiling sea with its grey-white beam and went out.

I went back to my cabin. The whole ship was fast asleep. Only the young midshipman looked up and mumbled something that was trying even now to be a joke about 'sleeping like the dead in a dead calm'. But he must at once have dropped his head back on his suitcase and dozed off. I say 'he must' because I didn't see him do it – before the words were out of his mouth I sank into bottomless lethargy.

In the morning we saw that the *Dimitry* lay clanking her chains close to the rust-brown shore. There is perhaps no other place in the whole world as poor and wretched as the bay that had saved our lives.

A few tufts of blackened grass dotted the bare saltmarsh, and caked snow glittered in the hollows.

The plain, level as a taught string, receded into muddy mist. Above the mist scudded low clouds, dropping charges of hard snow. There was not a man or a bird, or a ruined hut or well, there was not even a stone that might at least have looked like a gravestone on the whole of that dark-brown coast.

Yet although it is often said and for the most part justly, that

human beings are ungrateful, that morning after the cruel storm, I felt deeply and genuinely grateful for that bay and its wretched soil.

It might have been a Biblical desert, a land that God had cursed from now to all eternity. But its desiccated and barren body shielded us from the merciless elements. Within a stone's throw, the sea battered the shore so furiously that it shook under the impact.

The Commissar of the Nikolayevsk Port lent me his naval binoculars and, from behind a warm housing on deck, I looked at the coast for a long time, hoping to see someone. But neither a human being nor a sign of human habitation was anywhere to be seen.

It was impossible to believe that this really was the Crimea, the Taurida, that within some eighty miles the sun lay warm and fragrant on beechwoods.

We spent four days in Karadzhi Bay. The storm continued unabated, and every time I caught sight of the pewter sea bellowing without rhyme or reason, I felt sick at heart.

In the course of these four days the *Dimitry* assumed the appearance of a guard-ship – one of those communal dwellings for retired deckhands and dockers in which they huddle with their bedraggled and quarrelsome families.

There used to be such guardships in all the large ports. Old, disused, dilapidated steamers were set aside for this purpose, and moored in some out of the way corner of the docks so that they shouldn't spoil the contemporary scene.

In no time at all the guard-ship developed all the characteristics of a landlubber with a highly domesticated life – clothes lines, washing (of all colours but mainly, for some reason, lavender or muddy pink), battered zinc tubs; wire cages in which rabbits with red-currant eyes sat smacking their lips; aged tom-cats washing themselves on the crosstrees with the airs of retired admirals; puppies yapping at the seagulls that picked at the garbage floating around the ship.

Standing at anchor, the *Dimitry* fluttered with drying clothes. They were washed in seawater, without soap, so they were stained a spotty yellowish grey. All over the ship the air was thick with the smell of domesticity.

During the storm, the carpet-baggers, past caring, had looked on with indifference at their most precious possessions flying overboard. Some had even assisted the crew.

But now that the danger of death was past, they took to grumbling and accusing the Captain of being high-handed. Besides, there was nothing to eat.

Taking advantage of the rule covering 'accidents at sea', the Captain ordered the hold to be opened and our small cargo of barley for the Crimea to be distributed among the passengers. It could not be cooked – the storm had put the galley out of action, and in any case, we were very short of fresh water.

The passengers sifted the barley from the mouse-droppings with which it was liberally mixed, and then crunched it raw, like sunflower-seeds.

Water was used sparingly on the *Dimitry*. We were rationed to half a litre a day of the cloudy remnants, smelling of rust, at the bottom of the tank.

I had read as a schoolboy about the traditional mutinies on sailing ships – smoking pistols, and captains thrown overboard by their mutinous crews – but in no possible circumstances had I imagined myself seeing with my own eyes a mutiny in our time, on our peaceful Black Sea, near the blessed shores of the Crimea.

The revolt was started by the 'riff-raff' – six sailors in enormously wide bell-bottoms – and a section of the speculators who joined them.

'Why are we stuck here all this time?' the riff-raff shouted.

It was explained to them that the storm was still blowing and that, between Tarkhankut and Sebastopol, there were vast minefields which it would be madness to attempt to cross in this weather.

The riff-raff and the speculators sent delegates to the Captain. After hearing them out he said that the ship would stay where she

was for as long as necessary, and that it was no business of the passengers to meddle with navigation.

'And if we starve to death – is that our business?' roared the riff-raff. 'There are plenty of captains who'd sail straight through the mines – they aren't yellow. Why should we croak on account of that bastard? Let him put on steam and get a move on or we won't waste time talking to him – we'll chuck him overboard. He's not worrying about us – he's just shaking for his own skin. We'll take the ship over ourselves. There's nothing to it.'

It was our third day in Karadzhi. The boatswain knocked and, coming in, said in a low voice that the riff-raff and the speculators were milling outside the Captain's door, yelling, trying to break in and threatening to throw the old man overboard.

The Commissar got up, put his greatcoat on, picked up his Mauser and told us to stay in the cabin unless we heard a revolver shot. His face, the muscles in it bulging like whipcord, looked savage.

We waited for the shot but it never came. The wildest rumours reached our cabin. The Commissar was said by the crew to have immediately gone over to the riff-raff. He was seen going into the Captain's cabin, and was heard shouting. Coming out, he told the riff-raff that the old man was no better than a wet rag and a counter-revolutionary, but there was no point in chucking him into the sea. They should elect one of themselves to replace him. This, however, was a serious step, they would have to answer for it to the government, so they ought to talk it over quietly on their own, without interference from civilians and mercenary souls like the speculators.

'We'll go into the hold. We'll talk it over and choose our captain. Come on, boys.'

As soon as he and the boys were inside the hold, the crew – acting on the Captain's orders and with lightning speed – battened it down with thick boards, screwed them into place, and for greater safety piled a lot of heavy packing cases on top. They evidently felt it was a tricky job for, although they grinned, their hands were shaking.

Muffled curses, howls of rage and several shots came from the hold. The riff-raff were firing upwards at the boards – but it was quite useless, they couldn't possibly get out.

We realised at once that the Commissar was in league with the Captain and had deliberately lured the cut-throats into the hold. 'Just like Ivan Susanin!'[33] the midshipman said happily. We were worried that there was no food or water in the hold but glad that the Commissar had managed not to give himself away – it would certainly have been the end of him.

'Keep away from the hold! Stand from under!' the boatswain shouted from time to time, just to be on the safe side.

By nightfall the storm began to die down. The *Dimitry* weighed anchor and, her engine working at half-speed, sailed into the open sea. She started to roll at once but, compared to her tossing in the storm, this seemed to us as gentle as the rocking of a cradle.

In the morning I was awoken by sunlight pouring into the cabin. Even through the grey crust of salt on the porthole, the sky was radiantly blue. The ship was steady and only throbbed quietly to the vibration of the screw.

I rushed out on deck and blinked the tears from my eyes. It was several minutes before I could see clearly.

The *Dimitry* was sailing through deep, dense blue light. It was hard to tell where the blue of the sea became the blue of the sky. Cast in gold, the steep cliffs of Cape Lucullus glittered on our port side.

Melting icicles broke from the rigging and smashed into powdered snow on deck.

Behind the stern lay the inky wall of the receding fog. And in the quiet of the bays, in the sparing radiance of the winter sun, in morning clarity and in all its vivid, colourful seaside charm, Sebastopol stood revealed, as majestic as a Russian Acropolis.

22

Crimean Acropolis

A cutter manned by armed sailors met us at the entrance to North Bay. They boarded the ship, opened the hold and called down:

'Happy landings! Come out one at a time! And look sharp! The ringleader last!'

The 'riff-raff' climbed out on deck. They were searched, disarmed, arrested and removed.

The Commissar was told civilly: 'The Port Commandant is coming for you himself.' But of course nothing of the sort happened, as the Commissar, grinning into his tobacco-stained moustache, had known perfectly well.

The *Dimitry* made fast at the passenger berth in South Bay. The passengers were told that this was the end of the road for her. She had sprung another leak, her plates were parting at the seams, the engine had been very nearly pulled from the seating, so she was being towed straight to the ships' cemetery.

I felt sad for her, especially when the tug sailed up and the *Dimitry,* with a farewell hoot, followed it slowly to the dump.

When all was said and done, that noble and decrepit ship had made a supreme last effort, ploughed through an icy storm and saved us all.

I went ashore. The other passengers had scattered without my noticing it. I was left alone.

Where should I go? First, to the Count's Bay to take a look at Sebastopol wrapped in its ancient yellowish haze, and to decide what to do next. I had no friends in the town, unless you count the

girl-poet[34] – and I had forgotten her address and even her name.

I sat on a bench, warming myself in the weak sunshine and dozing in the quiet and the relief of having come through my stormy journey.

I must have sat for a long time, until the mist was touched with crimson, and a cold gust blew from the sea where a bell-buoy lowed mournfully on Constantine Reef.

I decided to go to the Sailors' Union, the only refuge to which I had a right as a member of *The Seaman*'s staff.

After hearing me out, the secretary, an old sailor with sad Ukrainian eyes, sat looking at me in silence for such a long time that I thought he had forgotten me. I gave a tentative cough.

'It's you I'm thinking about,' he said. 'You say you have no bread at all? And no roof over your head? That's bad.'

He thought about it for a few more minutes; then he bent over a pad made of scraps of wrapping paper, and began to write a long screed, checking it carefully as he went along and inserting the punctuation marks. Next to Blagov, he was the worst punctuation fanatic I ever met.

'Here you are,' he said at last. 'Go to Sadovaya Street, to the former residence of Admiral Kolans. Give this note to the Admiral's widow – and don't be scared of her, remember you're a staunch Red sailor. She lives with a few hangers-on in a side wing in the yard. We've turned the main building into a kindergarten of a sort. For children of sailors. There's no kindergarten to speak of – we just heat it occasionally and manage to keep them fed, more or less. Anyway, you can sleep there. But you have to be out between eight and five, when the children are there. And mind you don't freeze to death. That would cause me a lot of trouble.'

He handed me another slip, an order to the naval bakery to issue me with a loaf of bread.

'You'll have to eat it a crumb at a time. As it is, I'm stretching a point for you. How long are you staying in Sebastopol?'

'I'm not sure. We've been put ashore by the *Dimitry*. I'll have to wait for the other steamer from Odessa.'

'The *Pestel*?'

'Yes.'

'And what if she doesn't come?'

'Why shouldn't she?' I asked, startled.

'Because the *Pestel* is an old tub as full of holes as the *Dimitry*. Before she comes she has to get here. That's the problem.'

This was unarguable.

'The *Pestel*,' I said, discouraged, 'was supposed to sail a week after us.'

'Oh, well,' he said uncertainly. 'If you do run out of bread, we might manage a little bit more. We'll see. . . .'

I thanked him and set off for the bakery. There was nowhere I could go before five anyway, and it was only three.

The bakery was in the third yard in a small side street. An armed man stood at the gate. He looked at my order slip and let me through.

The baker fetched a loaf of bread but asked me before handing it over:

'What are you going to wrap it up in? And how will you carry it home? Haven't you got anything to put it into?'

I had neither a newspaper nor a bag.

He gave me a reproachful look. 'They'll take it from you before you're out of the yard. How can I issue you with bread? There's no point in my handing you a loaf.'

'They won't really grab it, will they?'

'Have you dropped from the moon or what?' he asked crossly. 'They'll grab it and they'll tear it to pieces. Night and day they're watching at the gate. Yurka!' he called out.

A boy of about ten came from the back-room; he was so thin, there seemed to be nothing left of him except his eyes.

'Take this queer fish with his bread through the Izhitsa Passage to Midshipman Boulevard,' the baker told him. 'And see that nothing goes wrong. And you, Comrade, hide the loaf under your coat. And don't think of eating it on the way. Not a crumb! If they spot it, it's all up with you. *They*,' he stressed, '*they* watch everyone like hawks.'

'Who are "they"?' I asked.

'Honest to God, Comrade, you must have landed straight from Mars! What d'you mean – "who"? People who are hungry, of course.'

The boy took me through the back of the bakery into a narrow alley between high walls. In one of them there was a small gate. He opened it with a huge brass key and we climbed an outside iron stairway, cluttered up with vases of dead fuschias, to the first floor of an old house.

Using a nail, the boy skilfully picked the lock of an oak door carved with swords and banners, and we entered someone's flat.

'Go in quietly,' said the boy, 'and don't be frightened. But don't talk to anyone. Just say how d'you do, if you want to.'

He pushed the nearest door and we walked into a drawing-room with a grand piano, portraits of important-looking admirals with long side-whiskers, and an aquarium without any water in it but overflowing with black potato peelings and beginning to smell. An old lady, tiny and yellow as a canary, lay on a sofa.

'In and out all day,' she said. 'And they pretend to have manners! They say "How do you do". No one asks you to say "How do you do".'

I hurried sheepishly after Yurka, into what must have been the dining-room.

A handsome, tousled, sleepy young man's head poked out from behind a Chinese screen. He looked at Yurka and shook his fist.

'You watch out!'

'Don't you throw your weight about,' Yurka burst out. 'I've been before and I'll come again. What did you think we were giving you bread for? Your outstanding services to the Revolution? Parasites!'

The head bobbed out of sight.

Next door, the kitchen was hung with cobwebs. A pretty girl without a spot of colour in her face, sat in the middle of the room. She had hitched her skirt over her swollen knees, and was staring at them, rubbing them with her hands, and weeping.

Outside the kitchen we crossed a dried-up garden, climbed over

a low wall, and found ourselves at the end of Midshipman Boulevard; it was deserted. Yurka said goodbye to me and turned to go.

'That was the "Izhitsa" Passage,' he explained before leaving me. 'It's the safest way. We use it for women and unarmed men. Well, good luck with your loaf. For God's sake don't start nibbling it on the way.'

I sat till five on a broken-down bench in Midshipman Boulevard. A graveyard silence hung over the town.

Only once did a hand-cart rattle noisily over the cobbles. I caught sight of it through the dry branches of the thuya hedge.

Two young women were pulling the cart. A man, barefoot and naked to the waist, was lying on it face-down. It took me a moment to realise that he was dead.

I started for Sadovaya Street.

The town seemed petrified. Here and there a putrid stench came from the back of the yards. Shrivelled ivy scraped softly on the weather-beaten walls. It was hard to believe that warm sunshine ever touched their mouldering stone.

I was irresistibly reminded of a couple of years earlier. In the features of Sebastopol, destitute and dying, I recognised those of Odessa and Kiev in times of typhus and famine.

A harsh, cutting wind rose, evidently from the north. Immediately, all along the street, warped sheets of iron set up their groaning on the roofs. Snow, quite unlike our Russian snow, blew sideways in the wind. It was grey, and mixed at once with the heaps of dry acacia leaves crumbled to dust on the pavements. Drifting out to sea, the slate-coloured sky seemed to take with it the last of the light and warmth and the last gentle, human voices.

I hurried past gaping, broken windows of basements, afraid to look inside. It was there they evidently dragged the corpses before carting them away.

But Sadovaya Street ran through the upper part of the town, and even in the leaden light of the fading day it seemed to me to have that air of quiet cosiness you often find in a remote, weed-grown, dead-end alley.

I soon came to the single-storey house of Vice-Admiral Kolans. The wrought-iron gate was decorated with anchors, and there was a flag-pole in the courtyard. For some reason, it had not been chopped up for firewood.

The side wing, at the back of the courtyard, was thickly overgrown with wild vines.

I knocked. From behind the door a woman's low-pitched voice asked me whom I wanted to see. I answered. The door swung open and revealed an old woman as tall as a grenadier, white hair stacked on her head and a bent poker in her hands, standing on the threshold. She was leaning on the poker; her eyes flashed fire.

'I,' she said, 'am the widow of Vice-Admiral Caesar Alexandrovich Kolans. But I don't remember you among my husband's friends, young man. And I never forget a face. So say what you have come for, but be clear and brief.'

Instead of replying, I handed her the note from the secretary of the Sailors' Union. She took it between two fingers, shook it as though to flick off the dust and said, turning:

'Read it, Maria.'

A girl as thin and pale as a ghost, with dark rings under her eyes and a church taper in her hand, advanced from the shadows. Without looking at me once, she read the note and, in her turn, called over her shoulder:

'Andrey! This gentleman is going to stay in the kindergarten. Come and show him the way.'

'Have you got any bread?' the widow asked suddenly.

'Very little.'

'No matter.' She struck the floor a sharp blow with her poker. 'I offer you a fair exchange. A little of your bread for a little goat's milk every day. I keep a goat!' Striking the floor again, she turned to the young man called Andrey who had come in and stood modestly in the dark. 'And why shouldn't I? In these circumstances – remember this, Andrey – the late Empress herself would have kept a goat and milked it with her own hands.' She struck the floor for the third time and raised her voice: 'With her own hands, I tell you. – Do you agree?'

'You mean, about the late Empress. . . ?' I asked.

'Don't be silly. The Empress was a fool and a drug addict. That Hessian fly![35] We wouldn't have had this revolution without her. I am asking you if you agree to the exchange.'

'Yes,' I said hastily.

'A pound of bread, that's all.' With a final blow of the poker she gave her orders to Andrey: 'Take the key and let this man into the main house.'

Turning to me, she added:

'But no nonsense, mind. No smoking, no rolling yourself up in the carpet to keep out the bugs' (Maria clasped her hands and gave a gasp) 'and no drinking eau-de-Cologne or any other filth. So long as God gives me strength I'll cope with anyone, be he the arch-commissar himself. Or Beelzebub or Satan. Goodbye.'

She turned and went off into the darkness at the back of the hall, her poker tapping. Maria raised the candle so that it lit up my face, and dropped it with a cry. The light went out. The girl ran after the widow, shouting:

'O God! Mama! It's him, I do believe it's him! Mama! My God!'

'Let's go,' said Andrey. 'I can't stand hysterical women. Sorry, I haven't introduced myself: former Midshipman Andrey Caesarovich Kolans, now goat-herd to my Mama – previously Mine Officer on the former War Transport Ship formerly called *Ratmir*.'

There was nothing to sit or sleep on in the kindergarten. Toddlers' chairs and tables were the only furniture. I sat on the windowsill or the floor, where I also slept. Contrary to the widow's orders, I wrapped myself for the night in the large, dusty, moth-eaten carpet.

I rolled it into a tube, tied it with telephone flex and crawled in head first. In the morning I crawled out the other end. During the night I covered the distance from one end of the carpet to the other.

This woollen pipe became my sure and even cosy refuge throughout my stay in Sebastopol. Wandering aimlessly through the frozen streets, I waited only for the night, for the moment

when I could creep inside my rug and get a little warmth into my bones, and dream the strangely consistent dreams which came to me night after night. I suppose it was the stuffiness that brought them on.

I dreamed about small towns set among rocks and gardens on the banks of rushing rivers or on the seashore where the beech-woods came tumbling to the very edge of the sands.

They were all inhabited by people I knew. There, I often met Lyolya and Old Uncle Nechipor, my father, Vrubel, the Sailor from the *Azimuth,* my Latin teacher Suboch, the poet Voloshin and the orderly Antoshchenko, Gronsky the 'little knight', Professor Gilyarov, Sytin the typesetter, and Ivan Bunin, and Lucienna, and Amalia Knoster.[36] With each of them I felt strong ties and a deep and moving relationship. Often, in my dreams, I searched desperately for a friend, knowing that he too was searching for me and that our meeting would be marked by rare and joyful events, but also that it would never take place.

Thinking about those dreams I realised that my life had been very long, whereas the years had always seemed to me brief and swift, vanishing almost without a trace. I was reminded of Fet's poem:

Life has flown and left no trace.
My soul was in a fever – to go where?

Hardly anything in it was any longer true or relevant for me, yet I delighted in repeating it to myself – perhaps because of the sharp contrast between the poem and the events around me.

There had been many such poems ever since the time of Pushkin and Zhukovsky[37] and they still survived. They lived on amidst hunger and sickness and battles, amidst enthusiasms, executions, anger and self-sacrifice, amidst unbelievable poverty and unshakable faith in the future, and they confirmed me in the simple truth that the heart of the nation remained whole and that this nation could not be destroyed in either body or spirit. I already realised that the suffering of those years could only enhance the grandeur of the country's heroism in those years of hope.

But all these thoughts and recollections of poetry and of dreams

were cut short when the moment came to crawl out of my carpet into icy daylight and the chill of the grey walls. Immediately my head began to ache from the cold.

I went to the Admiral's widow, drank, standing, a cup of warm goat's milk, and went out.

Sometimes I went out with the Midshipman and the goat Martha. Her dirty, greasy coat had the grey sheen of stale candle-wax or of rancid lard.

The Midshipman pulled her on a rope and we walked to Historic Boulevard, where the goat cropped the remnants of dry grass on the site of the heroic bastions of the Siege of Sebastopol.

In the course of these outings the Midshipman told me that his sister Maria was a psychopath and a religious maniac. Every other day she had a Requiem said at the Cathedral for Admiral Kolchak,[38] yet in every undersized man she met she thought she recognised Kolchak in disguise, on the run from the firing squad. She had mistaken me for him as well, as she had shouted to her mother on the evening of my arrival.

I spent long hours talking to Andrey on Historic Boulevard. I had nowhere else to go. We each slowly chewed a small chunk of stale bread. It had a crust of plaster on it, and it seemed to me that everything else in Sebastopol was white with plaster as well. The plaster came off the walls of the houses and crunched under-foot.

In the middle of the day I went to the Sailors' Union and had a plate of soup in the canteen. There I also managed to write, and had several pieces for *The Seaman* transmitted over the port wireless. One was about the *Dimitry* gallantly fighting the storm; another about an incident which would pass unnoticed nowadays but which dumbfounded me at the time.

A school was being built near Admiralty Bay. The whole undertaking seemed to me fantastic.

Covered with snow dust and staggering from weakness, the builders dug the foundations, struck the unyielding soil with their picks; gasping and breathless, they had often to sit down on the yellow boulders of Inkerman stone, to rest and wipe with

their sleeves their eyes reddened and watering in the relentless wind from the sea.

Every blow cost them a tremendous effort, yet the foundations went deeper with every day, until at last the first huge blocks of sandstone were laid in the trenches.

At the time, this event, so ordinary in itself, struck me as a miracle – and it was indeed a miracle of courage, by which the great hope of the future seemed to be materialised.

After leaving the canteen I usually walked to South Bay, where the cliffs reverberated to the ceaseless shooting at cormorants, or else to the market where food was offered in exchange for medicines or gold – but no one had either gold or medicine.

One day I started out for Khersones, but I never reached it. So desolate was the slatey, smoke-grey distance of the steppe, so harshly – like small rattles – did the grasses crackle in the wind, so mournfully groaned the sea rolling its funereal foam over the beach, that my heart was weighed down with loneliness and I turned back.

I had been stuck in Sebastopol for almost a fortnight. The Sailors' Union had received a wireless message from Odessa that the *Pestel* was about to sail, but there was still no sign of it. It might have put off sailing, or it might have been lost at sea – no one could tell.

I roamed the town, occasionally dropping in at the famous 'Panorama', where there was never a soul and where the huge painting by Rubo[39] shook in the icy draught.

Always looking for some warm place, I went into the Cathedral. There the cold struck through the thin soles of my boots, but near the altar a few candles were burning, and the associations of warmth with fire warmed me a little. But still I shivered all day long.

At last another message arrived, saying that the *Pestel* had left Batumi and would reach Sebastopol within twenty-four hours. I left the kindergarten and moved to the quayside. There were several of us waiting for the *Pestel*. We were allowed to spend the night in the harbour-station, in a small room papered with sailing schedules yellow with age.

I was glad of the shelter, if only for a few hours. An iron stove, still warm, stood in the corner of the room.

Its warmth seemed to us so genuine a miracle, such an unheard-of happiness that, sitting near the stove, an old woman wept.

The *Pestel* arrived in the morning. The sea was dead calm. Suddenly in the distance appeared the beautiful outlines of an old-fashioned steamer with a sharp bow and bowsprit. Still wrapped in the mysterious yellowish haze which obscured the horizon, she sailed slowly towards Sebastopol. The city was itself enveloped in a reddish mist gilded by the sun.

It was a beautiful marine day, all freshness and pale-blue light. But still more beautiful, and lovable and undeservedly forsaken, seemed Sebastopol as the imperious whistle of the steamer sounded over its bays numbed by the calm. It seemed to shatter the stagnant silence into a thousand splinters, and the splinters to fly echoing along the misty blue coast and to fall, with a final plaintive tinkle, beside Cape Aya and Laspi, over Foros and Meganom and Karaganda – over all the capes and the sea-rolled beaches of the Crimea, as yet unawakened from its half-death, starving, yet as ever magical.

On the morning of my departure Sebastopol arose before me once again in all the simple majesty of an Acropolis, a city conscious of its beauty and its prowess, one of the finest in our land.

23
Dead of Night

The day the *Pestel* sailed from Sebastopol was warm and damp.

Clear grey water licked the steamer's flaking sides, trying to wash away the stains of petrified salt.

But it was wasted effort. For shabbiness and cramped quarters, the *Pestel* could almost have given points to the *Dimitry*.

I went aft. At each turn of the helm its metal coupling bolts grated with strain, a torrent of rushing foam surged from behind the stern, and the bowsprit, as the sailors said, 'rolled' to one side or the other.

Ashen daylight fell on Sebastopol through the clouds. In this soft light you could guess at the nearness of the sun. At times I even felt as though my face were warmed by its unseen rays.

With all my being I sensed, on that January day, how gentle was the south, how soft its air, how pleasant its humidity.

I had been to Sebastopol as a child, and again during the war, and now at a time of devastation and famine. Every time it seemed to me a new city, different from the one I had known before.

I wondered what it would be like when I saw it next – soon, I hoped. That I would see it again I felt sure. And indeed I was to come again often, and stay long, and become as attached to Sebastopol as to a second home. I am bound to it by many memories, of much grief and much happiness.

Were it not for Sebastopol, I would probably not have so vivid and, I believe, so exact a picture of those imaginary cities of Grin's[40] – his noisy Zurbagan and weed-grown Liss – towns which must undoubtedly exist somewhere in the universe.

I was struck by the fact that on the blessed soil of Sebastopol even the lightest touch of the human hand could produce such attractive effects – unexpected alleyways and flights of stone steps drowning in wisteria, pleasantly winding roads, the swift play of sunlight on windows, balconies on which small lizards warmed themselves at midday, or the half-darkness and half-light of coffee houses with signboards daubed in watercolours like a child's painting.

For me, Sebastopol has never been quite real and part of prosy, everyday life.

Now and then, it seemed to me to be growing dull and grey, to have lost its picturesque landmarks. But at once the sight of the sea beyond the windows, or the smell of smoked *sultanka,* would bring me back to reality – to Sebastopol scattered like outcrops of ancient, yellowing marble on the shores of indigo bays, to the sound of its flags in the wind, to the phosphorescent flash of its oily waves, the smell of roses and tomatoes, and the visiting breeze from the far Aegean, drifting with its retinue of high pink clouds.

I watched Sebastopol for a long time from the stern of the *Pestel,* until at last we rounded the Khersones lighthouse and the lilac wall of the Crimean mountains rose on our port side.

Cold and excitement had kept me awake all night, so that now I could hardly keep my eyes open. I found a quiet, shady corner under the companionway in the saloon, lay down on the floor and fell asleep at once.

By the time I awoke, it was quite dark. The saloon, lit by a single bulb, smelt of sauerkraut.

I was seized with stomach cramps. Unbearably hungry, I shut my eyes to the horrifying prospect of total destitution and spent my last pennies on a plate of sauerkraut. I devoured it with the remaining crust of my one loaf of Sebastopol bread – it had lasted me till now.

On awakening I had thought it was night, but in fact it was only sunset. As though dripping with dark blood, the sheer cliffs of the Crimean range moved slowly and menacingly past the windows

of the saloon. An unpleasantly sharp east wind was blowing on deck. Dull water, the colour of scum, flowed against the steamer. The cliffs of Yaila, rusty red with leafless oakwoods, glowed faintly here and there in the last light.

Far ahead, the Yalta lighthouse blinked its crimson eye. There was not one other light on the entire coast. The whole of the Crimea lay deserted, empty, swept by winter winds, numbed by the cold.

I looked hard at the shore, searching for at least a glimmer, however pitifully small – if only the flicker of a candle – to show that someone was still alive in that wilderness. But there was nothing – only the night swiftly falling and snuffing out the peaks of the mountains one by one.

We pulled in at Yalta at nine in the evening. The town was quiet and pitch dark. An occasional rifle shot came from the outskirts.

The pier was deserted. The wind ribbed the puddles and rolled empty barrels of sauerkraut; a few sentries in puttees and with shouldered rifles wandered about shivering.

We were told that the *Pestel* would stay at Yalta until morning, as it was dangerous to sail at night because of the mines. We could stretch our legs on the pier if we liked, but it was better not to go into town. There were no lights; on the other hand there were bandits; you risked being stopped at the very first crossroads and stripped naked or even killed.

'And if not by the bandits then by the Whites,' added a sentry who stood beside the gangway. 'They're skulking in the mountains, those who didn't get away in time. They've got their hide-outs up there. You'd have to burn them out with blowlamps.'

The Captain ordered the ship to be moved from the quayside and anchored a few yards away, so that no one could board her without being seen, but I had time to slip down to the pier, and walked towards the town gate.

When I came to it, I stopped. A flickering 'bat' oil lamp hung on the gate. An old man in a squashed naval cap sat on a box under the lamp, a rifle between his knees.

Beyond the gate lay darkness. From it came an occasional rustle of dry leaves.

I walked on a few steps and stopped again. The watchman gave me a casual glance. It was all the same to him whether I was killed or not. All he wanted was that I shouldn't bother him with silly questions and distract him from thinking about his domestic affairs. He had seen plenty of killings, more than enough, and they no longer stirred him even to curiosity.

I looked back. I could still return to the ship, but an inexplicable excitement welled up in me. It was as though I were standing on the edge of a precipice.

I looked at the dim lights on the deck of the *Pestel,* and suddenly knew that I could not resist the call of the dark, that it was pulling me, that already I was more afraid of walking back, through the strip of solid shadow to the dim illumination of the pier, than of dissolving in that darkness and even of being killed in it.

I knew that I was foolishly tempting fate, that it was against all common sense to go into the town at night. But by now the darkness had me in its power. My heart pounding slowly, I persuaded myself that I could not go back until I had discovered what that watchful darkness concealed.

It happens, sometimes, that a man cannot recall the name of a place, or a date, or a surname, and until he does he is as one possessed, like a lunatic. He can think of nothing except the solution of the mystery, he becomes blind and deaf, and sees nothing around him. Something of the same sort had happened to me. The night held its secret, and I could not live until I had found the clue.

I was drawn to the darkness as French colonial soldiers are drawn to the Sahara. Babel had told me about them. They go off, deserting from their units, and never come back.

I had no fear. On the contrary, I longed for something to happen, immediate and decisive, that would settle my fate once and for all. It seemed to me that this night was a turning point in my life, that beyond it lay death or a blinding light.

I think now that my state in Yalta was the result of my hungry

fortnight in Sebastopol. But at the time I was in it I could not be so objective.

Coolly and calmly I reminded myself how to behave in the dark – move silently, by stealth, hugging the walls, careful not to give myself away by so much as a sigh. The night was my cover. The only dangers (but they were mortal) were either a betraying sound – a cough, a shuffle, a wheezing breath, the crackle of a leaf underfoot – or actually stumbling into someone in the dark.

But as I reached the bridge over the dry bed of the river Uchan-Su, I realised that safety lay not in any of these precautions, but in my unfailing sense of the presence of those who, like me, were hiding in the dark. Every one of these invisible people was my enemy. Warned by my sixth or my twelfth sense – whatever it was, I possessed it – I knew that a few steps away a man stood listening. And although my hands were empty I felt, as he did, the steel rifle bolt warm from the contact of his hand.

My other advantage, and an enormous one at that, was that the enemies whom the pitch-black night concealed from me were ignorant of the first law of survival on such a night – perfect silence. So they often gave themselves away and I had time to avoid them.

It occurred to me that man is a much more noisy animal than we usually think. Even the movement of turning one's head, and still more one's whole torso, makes a sound which is sometimes plainly audible.

There was still another danger – matches. There were no electric torches at that time, but a match might flare at any moment and deliver me to sudden death.

Where was I going? I did not know until I came to a dead-end.

I walked for a long time, sometimes stepping into the roadway when for some reason the pavement seemed dangerous. Occasionally the wind rose and rustled in the cypresses, then I walked more boldly.

I avoided the edge of the pavement. There were vents in it for draining the rain-water.

When exactly I came to a dead-end, I don't know. It must have been very late at night.

I walked into a stone wall. Another wall joined it on my left. I stretched up to feel the top, but could nowhere reach it.

On my right was still another wall. It was cut by a gate and, close to it, by a recess and a narrow wicket. Groping beside it, I found a name-plate.

This third wall was lower than the other two, it only came up to my shoulder. Beyond it I sensed that there was a thickly grown garden, although not a rustle came from it.

I took out my matches and struck three at once, so that the flame should be as bright as possible: I had decided to read the name on the plate.

By the light of the yellow flame I had time to read the words: *The House of Anton Pavlovich. . . .*

Then the matches blew out in the wind and, immediately, a shot came from somewhere above the Autsky highway. The bullet zoomed low over the wall, and with a soft crackle snapped a twig.

The second bullet went higher and was lost in the gloom in which lay the benumbed sea.

I squeezed myself into the recess of the wicket-gate. At once, everything was forgotten – my strange state, so like a sickness of the spirit, and the whole of my strenuous journey, as on a tight-rope, across the sinister town to this place, to Chekhov's house.

I had been to this house as a boy in 1906, two years after Chekhov's death, and had now come back after sixteen years.

Why I had come all the way to this remote suburb and to this particular house, I could not understand then, any more than I can today. I could not understand it, but of course it already seemed to me that I had come deliberately, that I had known my destination, that I had something urgent on my mind which had brought me here.

What could this be?

Suddenly and deeply, I felt the bitterness and pain of all I had lost in life. I thought of my mother and Galya,[41] of their dual, undeserved love for me, burning somewhere far away; of Lena;

of the attentive, tired eyes of Chekhov looking through his pince-nez. I pressed my face against the stone wall and, trying hard not to, wept all the same.

I wished the gate would creak open, and Chekhov come out and ask me what was wrong.

I raised my head. Pale in the darkness, the mountains shone with a magical and steady light. I guessed that snow had fallen on them – crisp dry mountain snow that crunches underfoot like gravel.

And suddenly I felt the nearness and certainty of happiness. Why, I don't know. Perhaps because of that pure snow-whiteness which looked like the distant radiance of a beautiful country, or because of my sense of sonship – long unexpressed and driven to the back of my mind – towards Russia, towards Chekhov. He had loved his country in many ways, and he had loved her as the shy bride about whom he wrote his last story. He had firmly believed that she was going unwaveringly towards justice, beauty and happiness.

I, too, believed in that happiness – that it would come to my country, to starved and frozen Crimea, and also to me. I felt this as a swift and joyful impulse, like a passionate look of love. It warmed my heart and dried my tears of loneliness and fatigue.

I made no attempt to hide on my way back. Twice I was shot at. At last, still in the same inky darkness, I passed the old man sitting with his rifle at the gate, and he gave me the same casual glance as he had several hours earlier.

For a long time I sat on the pier, leaning against one of the square blocks of cement of which it was built, and watched the night turn grey, and waited for the *Pestel* to pull in at the quayside. Then I would go back to my corner under the companionway in the saloon, and sleep. And even asleep, as always in my waking hours, I would wait for happy, unpredictable changes and events.

Notes

1 Ilf: pseudonym of I. A. Feinzilberg (1897–1931), co-author with Petrov of satirical novels *Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Golden Calf* (1931); author of *Notebooks* published posthumously in 1939.

2 Ostap Bender: racketeer, comic hero of *Twelve Chairs*.

3 *Bourzhouika:* 'housewife' – nickname given to small metal stove.

4 *Russian Word:* daily paper with a very large circulation, published in Moscow, 1894–1917.

5 Odessa grew from a small town to one of the largest Russian cities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The city and port were planned by J. Deribas (b. in Naples, 1749, d. 1800), who took service in the Russian forces and rose to be General, then Admiral. Armand, Duc de Richelieu (1766–1822), a French emigré, was Governor of Odessa until his return to France at the Restoration. The architecture is Western; there is a monument to Richelieu and streets named after Richelieu and Deribas.

6 Cheka: 'Special Commission' – original name of Soviet Security Service, now the K.G.B.

7 A. I. Denikin (1872–1947) Tsarist General in command of the Southern Front during the Civil War; formed the (White) 'Volunteer Army' and, with the aid of the Entente forces, twice occupied Odessa; defeated in 1920, emigrated to England.

8 Wild lands: region of Ukraine over-run by White and Ukranian nationalist bands under rival chiefs.

9 Valentin Katayev, b. 1897, novelist.

10 The Poles, fighting Russia for the territories they had lost to her in the 17th century, occupied Kiev and were expelled by the Red Army under General Budenny in 1920.

11 Tsaddic: Jewish sage.

12 Baron P. N. Vrangel (1878–1928), General who commanded the White Volunteer Army in the Crimea; defeated in 1920 and emigrated.

13 Plyushkin: miser in Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

14 Bagritsky: pseudonym of Edward Dzubin (1895–1934), poet, strongly influenced by the revolutionary-romantic style of the early twenties.

15 Fet: pseudonym of A. A. Shenshin (1820–92), lyrical poet. I. I. Brodsky: (1883–1939), realist painter on historical themes.

16 New Economic Policy (NEP): policy of economic relaxation which favoured the peasants and was ended by Stalin soon after Lenin's death.

17 Itinerants: realistic school of painters who organised itinerant exhibitions (1870–1923).

18 I. E. Repin (1844–1930), leading Itinerant painter.

19 The immediate effect of the NEP was to relieve the food shortage in the towns.

20 I. G. Babel (1894–1941), outstanding short-story writer; died in a concentration camp.

21 Babel fought in General Budenny's Cavalry Corps campaign against the Poles in 1920; he described it in his famous collection of short stories *Cavalry Corps*.

22 A. A. Blok (1880–1921): greatest Russian poet of his time. Wrote lyrical, mystical, symbolical verse; welcomed the revolution in his poem *The Twelve*.

23 Sasha Cherny: pseudonym of A. M. Glikberg (1880–1932), satirical poet.

24 I. M. Moskvin (1874–1946), famous actor.

25 Samuel Marshak (1887–1966), Children's writer, lyrical and satirical poet, author of Memoirs.

26 *Zembussar:* derisory term for those who avoided military service on the pretext of serving in local voluntary, semi-military organisations.

27 Igor Severyanin: pseudonym of I. V. Lotarev (1887–1942), 'ego-futurist' poet very popular during the First War; emigrated to Esthonia but returned when it was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940.

28 S. I. Kirsanov (b. 1906), poet.

29 I. K. Aivazovsky (1817–1900), painter of sea-scrapes.

30 'Luminous': the Russian word *luchezarny*, made up of *luch* – ray – and *zarya* – dawn or dusk, has no exact equivalent in English.

31 A. I. Kuprin (1870–1938), novelist and short story writer; emigrated in 1917, returned in 1939.

32 Sakhalin: island off east coast of Asia, used as convict settlement in Tsarist times.

33 Susanin: Patriotic hero of Glinka's Opera, *A Life for the Tsar*.

34 Girl poet: Paustovsky met her when he visited Sebastopol on the eve of the February Revolution (*Slow Approach of Thunder*).

35 Hessian fly: nickname given to the Empress Alexandra who was born Princess Alice of Hesse.

36 M. Vrubel (1856–1910), painter, friend of Paustovsky's father (*Childhood and Schooldays*). M. A. Voloshin (1878–1932), poet whom Paustovsky met in Moscow in 1917 (*In that Dawn*). I. A. Bunin (1817–1953), novelist (*Slow Approach of Thunder*). The rest are friends and acquaintances described in previous volumes.

37 Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), probably the greatest Russian poet, author of *Eugene Onegin*, etc. V. A. Zhukovsky (1783–1852), romantic poet.

38 Admiral A. V. Kolchak (1873–1920), in command of White Army which occupied Siberia and advanced West, reaching the Volga; defeated and shot in February 1920.

39 F. A. Rubo (1856–1928), painter of '*Defense of Sebastopol*'.

40 Grin: pseudonym of A. S. Grinevsky (1880–1932), novelist.

41 Galya: Paustovsky's sister.

STORY OF A LIFE

Konstantin Paustovsky

TRANSLATED BY MANYA HARARI AND MICHAEL DUNCAN

I CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOLDAYS

'Paustovsky gives us his childhood remembered not with nostalgia but with wonder and delight . . .'

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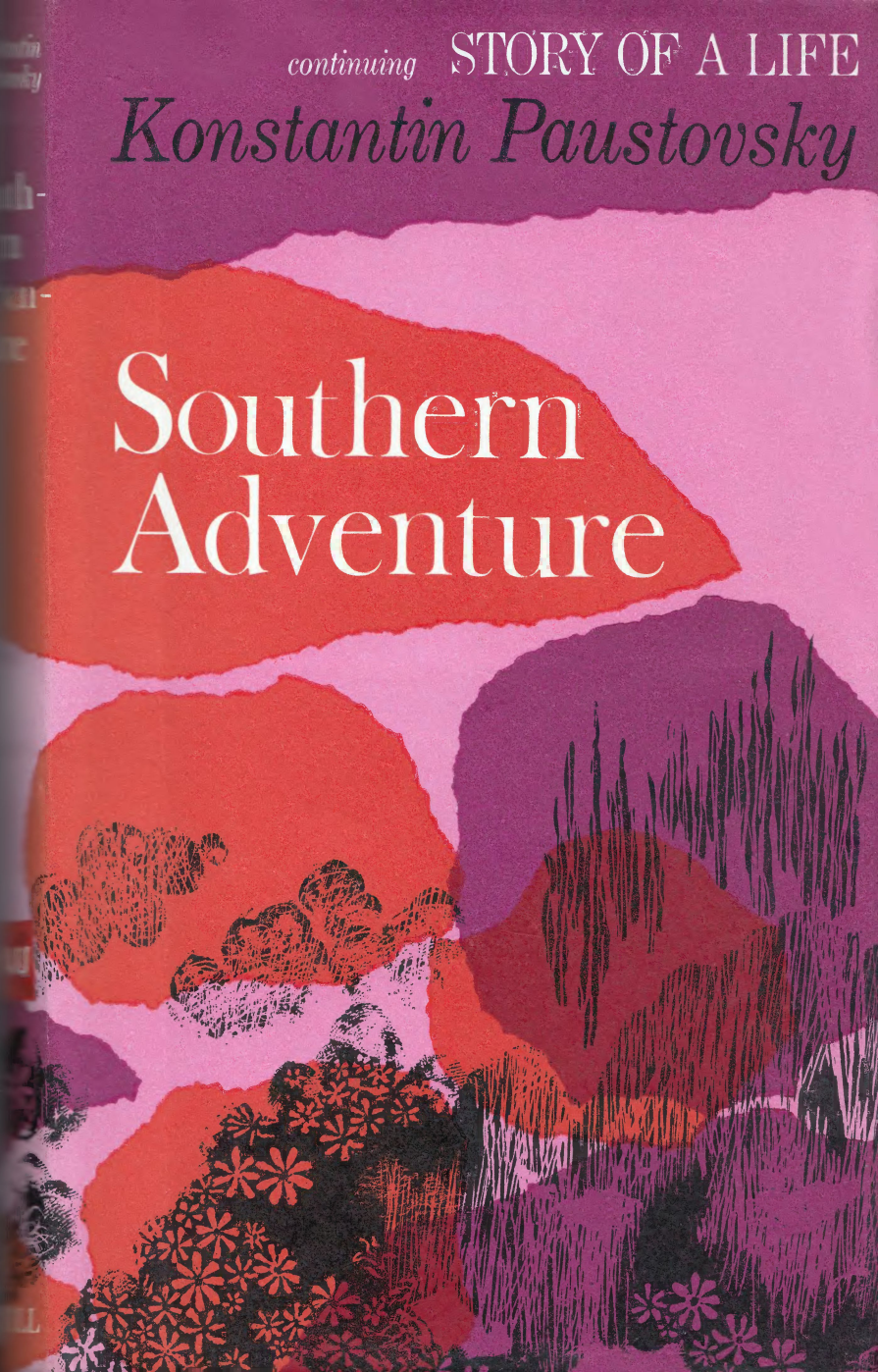
continuing STORY OF A LIFE

Konstantin Paustovsky

Southern Adventure



Southern Adventure is the fifth volume of Konstantin Paustovsky's autobiography *Story of a Life*. In the earlier volumes he wrote of his childhood and schooldays, of the war years and of the Revolution. *Southern Adventure* describes life in the Caucasus in the early nineteen-twenties. The Soviet regime was still extending its sway over the disintegrating territories of the former Russian Empire and had only just established itself in the republic of Abkhazia. The relative prosperity of this tiny state, its magnificent scenery, the far-famed beauty of its inhabitants exercised a powerful appeal on Paustovsky; as a journalist, he managed to smuggle himself into the country, which refused entry to all and sundry in an effort to protect itself from the typhus epidemic raging outside its borders. With great perceptiveness he portrays the life of a society which still had room for prince and commissar, ancient codes of justice and Soviet law, traditional blood feuds and world war partisans. His is probably the only authentic first-hand account of that strange, southern world, little enough known at the time and which has since disappeared for ever.

After a bout of malaria he left Sukhum and lived for a while in the oil port of Batum where he edited the seamen's paper *The Mayak*. Then, homesick for the north, he moved to Tiflis, from where he hoped it would be easier to return to Moscow. Tiflis, the capital of Georgia, had only recently been reabsorbed into the Soviet Union after a short-lived and precarious independence. Paustovsky's memories of his experiences there, his friendship with the foremost artists and writers of the time and, above all, his love, hesitant and unrequited, for a Polish girl, are tinged with a bitter-sweet nostalgia.

Jacket design by Yvonne Skargon

The Author

Konstantin Paustovsky, born 1893, went to school in Kiev and afterwards to Moscow University, as described in his *Story of a Life: Childhood and Schooldays*. When the first World War broke out he was not accepted for military service but worked in various capacities: in a field dressing station, in an armament factory and eventually as a journalist in Moscow. The volume in which he tells of these experiences, *Slow Approach of Thunder*, ends with the outbreak of the Revolution. During the succeeding turmoil, mistaken by the Bolsheviks for an Anarchist, he narrowly escaped being shot; later he made his way to Kiev, a battle centre of the Red Army, the White Army and the Ukrainian Nationalists; he had many adventures, which are described in *In That Dawn*.

Years of Hope takes up the story from the time of his arrival in Odessa, recently evacuated by the Whites and still under blockade. Here the author worked in the editorial section of *The Seaman*. Living conditions were appalling. In spite of this, intellectual life flourished, the city was full of poets and writers. These included Babel of whom Paustovsky gives an unforgettable picture.

The present volume takes up his story at the time when he moved to one of the small Caucasian states—Abkhazia.

In 1927 he gave up journalism to write novels, short stories and essays which gained him a unique position in the Soviet literary world. In 1964 he visited England. In July 1968 he died.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Story of a Life, I: Childhood and Schooldays
Story of a Life, II: Slow Approach of Thunder
Story of a Life, III: In That Dawn
Story of a Life, IV: Years of Hope

STORY OF A LIFE

* * * * *

Southern Adventure

KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

translated by
Kyril FitzLyon

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I

A Short Explanation

This book is the fifth out of the autobiographical series which I have called *The Story of a Life*. In it, the 'development of the play' has compelled me to turn away from Russia proper and transfer the action to its extreme South – the Caucasus and Transcaucasia.

Again I found myself in areas where the Soviet regime had only just become established. It so happened that I kept catching up, though with considerable intervals in between, the revolution's southward progress. To my mind, therefore, its progress represented not a direct line, but curious come-backs and loops. Experiences of a year ago came back, but in another guise and embellished with various additional events.

I lost touch with Russia for almost two years. But I do not regret it: I learned much in that space of time.

There are men and events galore in this book, even though considerably less than there were in real life.

The laws of drama sensibly enough, divide plays into several distinct parts.

There is, to begin with, the exposition, introducing the reader or the spectator to the people concerned, the events and the landscape. Then, the development of the action, followed by its culmination, its highest peak, its explosion, with the play reaching its maximum tension. At that point the spectators begin to get excited, rise in their seats and even scream sometimes.

In the cinema the most typical example of culmination is the chase. Those horsemen galloping madly (to kill an enemy or save a girl) have cost the peaceful and particularly the youthful, section

of mankind rather dear and have worn out a lot of nerves.

Unfortunately, we do not know how to measure the wearing out of nerves. In our nerve-wracked age science has not yet been able to find a means of doing it.

Strange as it may seem, the real life described by me followed in those years the rules of stage dramatics.

The first book (*Childhood and Schooldays*) can be called the exposition, a leisurely introduction to the story. The second (*Slow Approach of Thunder*) develops the theme; the third and fourth (*In that Dawn* and *Years of Hope*) correspond to the maximum tension, while the fifth (*Southern Adventure*) brings with it a certain relaxation of tension. This always happens in plays. The playwright relaxes the tension to enable the spectator to rest a little. Then comes the inevitable end.

In this case, the relaxation of tension, a digression from the main theme, was brought about by life itself. It took the author to the Caucasus with its great variety of events, of men and of nature and filled his existence with southern gaiety and humour. In the south humour never runs dry under any circumstances and holds nothing in excessive awe.

2

My Thanks to a Reader

I want to start this book with an expression of thanks to a reader, naval captain A. I. Malov, retired, now living in Sebastopol.

Captain Malov checked *Years of Hope* – the autobiographical sketch preceding this one – for all that had any bearing, direct or indirect, on the sea, and sent me his observations.

The captain's keen and profound knowledge of naval matters turns his observations into short sea stories. His letters include what amounts to research into the colour of the north-west Crimean coast-line, descriptions of the so-called 'Kovalevsky Tower' off Odessa, which served as a transit point to navigators, and many other details interesting enough to give rise almost inevitably to what may be called naval romanticism.

Let me quote three observations, taken entirely at random out of all those sent to me by the captain.

They are a clear example of a man's attitude to his work.

Above all, he respects it and has no use for any flippancy in connection with it.

In one passage I put the words 'sailing instructions' in inverted commas. This immediately aroused the old sailor's entirely justifiable objection: 'You must not belittle sailing instructions and put them in inverted commas.'

In another place I was rash enough to say that the Tarkhankut Cape and lighthouse had long enjoyed a bad reputation among sailors. In this connection my captain's remarks are: 'This is true. But why do you mention the lighthouse? The cape is one thing – you are right there! But the lighthouse, which brings us to safety,

which sends out warnings to us and enables us to find our bearings is remembered kindly for all that it bears the name of Tarkhankut disliked by sailors. Sailors hold the beam sent out by the lighthouse in high esteem, but have no word of praise for capes, narrows and other navigational risks.'

And, finally, quite touching is the captain's defence of the steamship *Pestel* to which I showed a lack of respect.

I had made several voyages on the *Pestel*, got used to her and even grew to like her. In the early years of the Soviet regime she alone maintained a line of communication between the Caucasian coast and Russia.

But I wrote that the *Pestel* was a decrepit old steamer with cramped quarters, just like the old tub the *Dimitry*. (The latter so-called 'sea chest' became one of the inanimate characters of the book *Years of Hope*.)

These words of mine provoked the captain's answer:

'You are making the *Pestel* out to be too decrepit. She was different to the *Dimitry*– younger, more sea-worthy and differently constructed. Her external appearance, and her exceptionally attractive hull, masts and spars and superstructure earned for the *Pestel* deep respect, affection and even a special kind of love of all sailors both in the merchant fleet and in the navy.

'The *Pestel* went down in 1943. She was torpedoed somewhere off the Anatolian coast. Up to 1941 she plied between Odessa and Batum, and when war broke out became a transport ship. Her memory is fresh among the old survivors of the Black Sea fleet.'

On ending this little digression I should like to wish every writer to have readers as exacting as Captain Malov.

And at the same time I cannot help feeling, once again, a pang of envy at the captain's fate because he lives in Sebastopol, and I cannot refrain from writing, once again, about that magic city.

I am writing this in Yalta. I am writing slowly, often laying aside my pen and thinking that one of these days I shall certainly go to Sebastopol.

In Sebastopol I shall be met by a sultry autumn. Grass will still be growing, dusty but green, in the narrow shadows cast by its

walls. I do not even know the name of that curly, unassuming little grass. It contents itself with a little dew, and heroically endures the city's scorching sun. Besides, it gives out a pleasant, if faint, smell. It is reminiscent of the smell of that black, sun-roasted seaweed with which deserted beaches are so often strewn. It is covered with tiny grains of salt. Rub a bit of the seaweed in your fingers and it will crumble into brown powder.

Just now a pall of heat is hanging over Sebastopol. It is as if someone invisible has taken the heat and carefully poured it into all the city streets and courtyards up to the level of the tiled roofs. From under the heavy layer of heat comes the ringing chirping of cicadas hidden below the ground.

You can sit for hours in Sebastopol on the Istorichesky Boulevard, overpowered by the sultry heat, and then suddenly heave a deep sigh as an unexpected gust of wind, having forced its way along an invisible fairway between the walls, the fences, the monuments, the mined bastions, the acacia shrubs, hits you in the face. This will save you from fainting and remind you that near-by, just behind the Bratskoye Cemetery, come and go the waves of the Black Sea.

Sebastopol's bays are cut into a porous coast which looks like a fossilized sponge. Weak little spikes of grass and an occasional faded flower the size of a match-head, grow out of the cracks in that sponge-like sandstone. In the vegetable kingdom they are obviously regarded as dwarfs. Or perhaps as children.

I am a man with a long life behind him. It has been my lot to experience almost all that can happen in this world to a man who has reached an age when in Esenin's words 'his mortal body should prepare to speed him on his way.' And I envy those grassy spikes because for days, weeks and months on end they stand over the sea, mute witnesses of life. And no one forcibly compels them to give expression to their feelings.

I even think that time, for them, moves slower than for us, and, immobile, they see the world more calmly and more clearly than we do.

So far as I am concerned, I have, all my life, been passing from ceaseless activity to a longing for a state of mind in which —

The icy brook that plays among the pastures,
Plunging the world into a hazy dream,
Babbles and sings of a mysterious saga
About the peaceful country whence it flows.

Indeed, I sometimes longed to experience just an inkling of that natural state when one is plunged into a hazy dream. But I knew well that that kind of natural state is merely called a dream. In fact it is full of a fruitful tension.

I envied the spikes of grass. They saw the slow sequence of dawns and noons and sunsets, the white rocking of ships on the roaring waves, the rays of the sun darting out of clouds, the tiny droplets of dew, like shimmering manna and the stars like large drops of dew.

These insignificant little blades of grass constantly witnessed the passage of life's transitory events in all their splendour. And all this returned every time a new day dawned.

But envy died quickly whenever the lights of an express train streaked through the dusk and were extinguished by a tunnel on the far side of the South Bay. The light led away from the archaic darkness of Khersones and Inkerman, from the wild precipices of the Aya and Fiolenta bay, and on to the north where the yellow birch leaves were probably dropping by now and filling the air with their bitter smell.

The world, it seems to me, is worthy of a slow and fruitful contemplation as much as of rational and powerful action. Contemplation is basic to the creative act and to the love of the land, above all one's own native land.

I see that this talk about Sebastopol is taking me too far out of my way. I shall, therefore, break it off and get on with my narrative.

Literary connoisseurs who do not write books maintain that narratives must have an iron logic of their own. Those who do write books can only accept on trust the existence of this law and try to fulfil it.

3
The Tobacco Republic

The approach of a nor'-wester could be felt in the city while the *Pestel* was still anchored at Novorossiysk. There was the first sign of this demoniac wind: a cloud, resembling a braided piece of dirty cotton-wool, stretched over the mountains. And the mountains themselves looked like dead camels with ribs bulging out from underneath their dusty hides.

The cotton-wool braid was swinging round now, slipping down the sides of the mountains and bringing the wind with it. We had to push off while the nor'-wester had not yet had time to pounce on the port. By now the wind, full of malignant joy, was whistling through the rigging and blowing the dirty-white water right out of the puddles.

The *Pestel* weighed anchor and sailed southwards out to sea at full speed ahead. According to sailors the nor'-wester rapidly becomes weaker as it travels away from Novorossiysk and loses its destructive force.

We succeeded in getting away from it.

In the middle of the night I woke up, caught sight, through the porthole, of the chilly-looking lights of Tuapse, and went to sleep again.

As I was dozing off I was thinking that to judge by what I had seen so far, I should not expect too much from the Caucasian coast. But in the morning I awoke to something well-nigh magical.

I woke up and lay for a long time with my eyes closed and feeling on my face the warm palms of somebody's hands. They smelt of mimosa.

It was, of course, the morning breeze. It filled my cabin, wandered lazily all round it and touched everything it met on the way, including my cheeks.

I was still half asleep, but it occurred to me that I had not shaved for the past four days and was sure to scratch these darling hands with my bristly beard. I felt ashamed, decided to shave at once and it was probably this decision that finally woke me.

The anchor chain gave out a gently ringing noise. The usual port calls and cries reached me from the deck: 'Raise the crane, you bloody fool! Lower it slowly now!'

At last I opened my eyes. Beyond the porthole, the sun was shining and looking as if it had drawn nearer the earth, covering half the sky and half the sea. A living wall of luxuriant vegetation was swaying in its triumphant light.

The wall was bespattered with multicoloured dabs of paint – cinnabar, purest white and ochre. I shut my eyes and shook my head; on opening my eyes again I saw that these were not dabs of paint, but unfamiliar flowers peeping here and there through the foliage.

'What is this?' I asked myself, sitting up on my bunk. 'A mirage? Or the island of Tahiti? Or the heavenly islands of Samoa?'

No, it was neither a mirage nor the islands of Tahiti nor a hallucination after a gloomy night. Outside I heard the raucous voice of the second mate.

'No one at all,' he was saying with great vigour. 'We shall allow no one out on shore. Is that clear? Not even Sholom-Aleikhem in person. By order of the Government of the Abkhazian Republic! And that's that! So you can admire Sukhum from the deck and cease worrying. Your life isn't over yet and you'll have time to see all you should see in this world and even some of the things you shouldn't'.

I dressed quickly and went on deck. The glitter of the copper plates fixed on the steps of the ladder dazzled me. A slight dizziness made me clutch the hand-rails.

Harsh, astringent smells wafted in from the shore and blended with the hardly perceptible fragrance of roses.

The smells would intertwine until they formed a tight ball and the air was compressed into a thick syrup; then they would untwine again into distinct and separate fibres and I would detect the breath of azalias, bay-trees, eucalyptus trees, oleanders, wisterias and many other flowers wonderful in appearance and colour.

I resolved to go ashore at Sukhum at whatever cost. And not only to go ashore, but to remain there.

It seemed to me that if only I went ashore my childhood dreams would come true. Dreams of being able, if only with the tips of my fingers, to touch the hairy trunk of a coconut tree, a bamboo's emerald bark ever cold and shiny, the earth pink with coral sand.

As a boy I called such dreams 'unrealizable', thereby imitating my mother. I often heard her use this word when she was angry with my father. She even screamed at him. He would bow his head and meekly leave the house to avoid the constant reproaches, and mother would then weep tears of pity for him and make me promise that I would love him all my life and take care of him like a child. 'I can't bear to look at him all hunched up like this,' she would say with despair in her voice.

But neither she nor I nor anyone else in the family took sufficient care of him to save him from his fate. This weighed on my mother's conscience till her dying day.

In my childhood I did not, of course, feel any bitterness because of this vanity of my dreams. Nor could I have. I merely surmised that this was a very sad feeling and that, as my father once said, it laid waste the guiltless human heart.

When I was already in my eighth form in school I found narrow strips of paper in my father's writing table, covered with his writing. I was able to decipher only one phrase about it being incomparably harder to suffer things unrealized than those unrealizable.

A faint sorrow for the unrealized things in my life has never left me since, despite my outwardly cheerful character. What has ever since attracted me most have been events, circumstances and men who left behind them the impression of a fleeting phantom.

I understood the meaning of my father's words and grew to love him all the more, but, by then, at that terrifying distance which even now separates us. He was lying in the churchyard near Belaya Tserkov, among prickly thistles and covered by the parched and cracking earth, while I was wandering round the world, alone.

We had lost each other for ever. But I at least could call him back from time to time. And he could not even do that.

I firmly made up my mind to stay in Sukhum. But how could this be done?

The *Pestel* was lying at anchor, some distance away from the shore. Only two broad Turkish boats (they were called *magunas*) were moored to her side. Bales of cotton were being loaded on the *Pestel* from these boats with the help of a crane. No one was allowed on shore because of the mysterious quarantine enforced by the Abkhazian authorities.

I went to see the captain and told him that as a correspondent of the *Moryak* I had to go on shore if only for an hour. The captain made a somewhat wry face.

'We must speak to the port superintendent,' he said. 'A difficult man. Ah, well, it can't be helped. Let's go.'

The port superintendent – a man with eye-brows the colour of a tobacco-stained moustache – firmly and rudely refused to let me out on shore.

'Credit,' he said threateningly, 'spoils human relations.'

What credit had to do with it I failed to understand.

The captain insisted and the port superintendent finally gave in.

'Off you go, then,' he said 'but only in what you're standing in now. Without a suit-case, without any personal effects and even without a cap.'

'Why?' I asked, though I knew perfectly well that the superintendent was afraid I might get some money from my cabin and remain in Sukhum.

'I have the strange habit,' he replied, 'of taking offence at useless questions. If you agree, take one of the magunas. It's about to push off. You will come back with the next maguna. Can't make it any clearer.'

I used a rope ladder to get down into the maguna. I had, as yet, no idea how I should get out of the difficulty about Sukhum. The only thing that made me feel slightly less worried was that I had all my money with me. I decided to sacrifice the suit-case as there was nothing valuable in it except three clean shirts. The manuscript of my first story, *The Romantics*, I had left in Odessa.

Tobacco dust in the maguna tickled my throat. Malachite waves would occasionally peep over the side of the boat. The Abkhazian porters, with faces like birds of prey, screamed furiously. Dusty sacks were wound proudly round their heads.

I had the impression that the porters were about to throw me into the sea. But the superintendent shouted to them something in Abkhazian. They quietened down at once and even offered me some of their 'Samsun' tobacco.

The tobacco took my breath away for a few seconds. The sun spun round in the sky. The Abkhazians shook their heads in pitying sympathy and reluctantly took the heavy oars. The maguna rolled from side to side as it crawled towards the mysterious shore.

In order to understand what was then happening to Sukhum I must describe the general situation in the little patch of the Caucasian littoral at the foot of the mountains occupied by sultry little Abkhazia.

The Soviet regime in Abkhazia was of recent date. The old and the new were jumbled up together in the way things get jumbled up in a basket after a sharp jolt.

Only the youth and inexperience of the Soviet regime could explain the incidents and surprising situations which arose in Abkhazia at the time and bore a strong resemblance to the customs of the small South American republic described by the gay pen of O. Henry in his book *Cabbages and Kings*.

During the early days of my life in Sukhum I constantly lost faith in the reality of what was happening around me. My sense of time and situation had somehow become blurred.

The sight of a smuggler swinging in a noose of tarred rope from the yardarm of the schooner *Tri Brata,* would probably not have surprised me greatly. If a round-shaped armoured

monitor, dating back to the American Civil War, had suddenly appeared in the bay and started shooting small cantaloup-size cannon-balls at Sukhum I should not have been particularly amazed.

If my Sukhumi land-lady, the seventy-year old mademoiselle Henriette Jaloux, former governess, had turned out to be an ex-mistress of Abkhazia's ex-ruler, His Serene Highness Prince Shervashidze, this would not have been all that extraordinary either. With unruffled calm I should have continued to sip my tea while eating spoonfuls of cornel jam – the sourest in the world – presented to me by the elderly *mademoiselle*. The syrup of this jam was as blood-red as a mountain sun-set.

What, then, was in fact happening in Abkhazia?

The tiny country, tightly held as in a vice on three sides by districts where men were dying of typhus, decided to seek its own salvation by applying the simplest and most readily available method – by cutting itself off from the outside world and taking great care that not a mouse should cross its frontier.

To do this was relatively easy.

On the north Abkhazia was fenced off by the Glavny range of mountains. The only existing pass – the Klukhor – could not be used at the time: the path used by pack animals had crumbled in several places. Night and day, without respite, earth and rocks crept down the precipices in great landslides and sent up billows of smoke.

On the north, in the direction of Sochi, and on the south, in the direction of Adzharia, the roads and bridges had been blown up during the civil war and were now blocked by the subsequent avalanches.

There was only one way left – the sea. But there were no ships on that sea other than the *Pestel*.

The easiest thing to do was to impose a quarantine against typhus and not let anyone off the ship. This, in fact, is what the local authorities did.

But meanwhile, rumours of a little paradise said to exist on the Caucasian coast, with a fantastic abundance of food and other goods and a fabulous climate, spread all over the Black Sea area

and the neighbouring regions. Everyone was striving to get into that paradise, but it remained firmly sealed off.

The paradise was called Abkhazia. Little was known about it in those days. There were practically no newspaper articles or books dealing with it, and apart from Chekhov's *Duel*, not a single story had been published centring on Sukhum.

Everything was alien to me in Abkhazia at the time – the mountains, the rivers, the vegetation, the people.

At sunset the enormous mountain tops – I did not know their names as yet – stood out in especially sharp outline. Their jagged and icy teeth smouldered in the crimson glow of the setting sun.

At first, and because I was a stranger to these things, these gigantic ridges gave me the impression of moving slowly from north-west to south-east, like an endless and revolving panorama.

To rid myself of this feeling, I would glance at something close to me – at houses or at stones under my feet – and then the mountains would suddenly halt in their tracks.

This first, somewhat sinister, impression which the mountains made on me, disappeared only in the spring when I found myself in the heart of Abkhazia and saw the mountains in the full might of their beech woods, the foaming and frothing of their rivers, the wealth and range of their vegetation.

I had no friends in Sukhum and I often wandered entirely by myself in the country around it. But I never ventured out very far.

According to the local inhabitants, the Caucasus, torn by war and civil strife, began ten kilometres away. At any twist of the mountain road one ran the risk of getting a bullet in one's back or being killed by a sudden landslide.

Law and order reached the Caucasus slowly, by degrees, and only with the establishment of the Soviet regime.

Therefore, I never went beyond the river Kelasura, which reaches the sea five kilometres from the town. But even this river was full of mysteries.

At its bends the Kelasura formed small sand-banks. They glistened in the sun as if the sand had been of gold.

When I first came to the Kelasura I collected a handful of dark-golden flakes like fish-scales, gay and weightless. But an hour later they had changed their colour to black and looked like iron filings.

In Sukhum it was explained to me that this was not gold, but pyrites. However, I did not throw it away, but made a little pile of it on the window-sill. Naïvely, I hoped that under the influence of the sun's rays the pyrites would once again shine like gold. But this did not happen.

The vegetation, too, was mysterious – both the ancient, which had existed in Abkhazia for thousands of years, and the new, transplanted from Japan, Italy, India, Polynesia and other countries. The first to grow this foreign vegetation on the Sukhumi coast were scientists experimenting in botany and the local horticulturalists.

The vegetation was truly amazing in its fantastic shapes, the vast size of its plants and its fragrance which made the head reel.

Behind Mademoiselle Jaloux's house – the last house in the town on Mount Chernyavsky – the ground was covered by a thick growth of azalias. It served as a hiding place for jackals. The smell of the azalias gave one a headache.

The azalia fields were backed by a grove of lacquered bamboos. At the slightest wind the bamboo leaves started whispering to each other; they did not make a noise like our northern leaves. But if the wind grew stronger, the leaves twisted and twined like little snakes, and whistled softly – again like vicious little snakes.

The Abkhazians, too, seemed mysterious. Most of the men were lean, speaking in guttural voices, somewhat reminiscent of an eagle's cry. They almost never came down from their saddles. Their horses, as lean as the men, pawed the ground.

Nearly all Abkhazians had profiles worthy of being cast in bronze.

The men were distinguished by their pride, their hot tempers, their unimpeachable honesty, but they were sullen and had slow, leisurely movements. All work was done by women. By the time the women reached thirty they looked like old hags.

I often met women on the road from the mountain villages to Sukhum. They dragged themselves along, bent double and scarcely

able to breathe under the weight of sacks of maize or bundles of brush wood. And in front of them, hand on hip, would ride the men on their glossy steeds – the husbands and sometimes the sons or even grandsons of these women. Belts with silver ornaments would sparkle on their tunics of fine cloth.

They rode past, with the impassive faces of men whose good looks were universally acknowledged. And yet they felt ill at ease. I could see this because they were unable to sustain an accusing look directed straight at them, but turned away and galloped off.

I made several attempts to help the women – quite small girls some of them – but they shied away so startled, and there was so much frightened entreaty in their eyes that I ceased trying to help, realizing that I would only make things worse for them.

Many of these women must have been beautiful, once. But the only way of judging this was to look at their eyes and fingers. As they walked, the women lightly touched the ground with their fingers, as if they were pushing themselves off: this probably made it easier for them to carry their back-breaking burden.

Sometimes I would notice an old woman with thin nervous lips or a youthful sparkle in her eyes, and it then became obvious that the woman was not old at all. She had been made old by her life of a beast of burden.

Occasionally, the women would stop and wipe away their tears with the back of the hand. But these were tears not of sorrow or resentment, but of infinite weariness.

In the mish-mash of the old and the new which then prevailed, the most extraordinary thing, at first sight, was the existence in Sukhum of the Emperor's A.D.C., General Prince Shervashidze, former feudal ruler of Abkhazia and, so they said, the morganatic husband of the dowager Empress Marie.

No one interfered with him, probably because the old prince had long ago become a drunken sot and was in his dotage.

He lived in a small house in the outskirts of Sukhum. During the first Soviet autumn some peasants, out of sheer habit, brought him their feudal dues – maize, tobacco, goat's cheese and damson plums.

On the day the dues were paid a shrill, ear-piercing, shrieking

noise, like that of innumerable pigs, wiggling and squealing in their sacks on market day, made Sukhum shudder.

It was the squeaking of ungreased cart wheels. The carts were drawn by buffaloes, unruffled and serene. They did not even squint at the skulls of their cousins, the horses, displayed on the fences of Abkhazian courtyards to ward off the evil eye.

On hearing the screeching I woke up and looked out of the window. The indigo sky threatened no disasters. It seemed to shimmer in joy. But the screeching relentlessly swelled and surrounded Sukhum from all sides.

Mademoiselle Jaloux shouted to me that it was the inhabitants of Tsebelda, Merkheuli and some other villages bringing down their dues to Shervashidze. She promised that the screeching would soon die down, but begin once more towards dusk when the carters, after drinking some young Madzharka wine in the local *dukhan*[1] and singing a song in honour of relatives and friends, would be crawling home again.

This was the last time these dues were ever offered. Shervashidze prudently declined to accept them, leaving for himself only a little bit of maize.

He regarded himself as a mediaeval knight, that old prince. He spoke such high-falutin' Russian that even Russians were puzzled. I heard him speak Russian. He began every sentence with a pompous 'be so kind'.

He was an old man with a boozer's sleek, scarlet face, but a majestic bearing. He wore a *cherkeska*[2] of fine cloth, with bandoleers and aiglets, but no epaulettes and liked, after he had had his drink, to sleep on benches in the main street.

4
The Double Meaning of the word 'Legend'

The word 'legend' has a double meaning.

It is either romantic folklore (mostly pseudo-folk), or the explanation of conventional signs on a map.

Ever since childhood I have been fond of maps and plans, and ever since childhood I have been distrustful of legendary lore. Particularly Eastern lore. To me it seemed bogus.

Perhaps this dislike arose after reading guide-books which told many boring and unnatural legends of well-nigh every cave, cliff, spring and grave.

But in general, guide-books, apart from this one defect, are fascinating. There is scarely anyone who does not like reading them. In my youth, any guide-book was, for me and teenagers like me, a kind of free ticket journey to interesting countries. Every guide-book served as a spur to the imagination.

There was no guessing what adventures we might be involved in by a guide-book's dry information about the cost of a cab-ride round Lisbon or the necessity for haggling in the Brindisi market.

And then, no sooner do you discover how much a cabby charges you in Lisbon, than you are seized with the desire to hire him and drive along the city's old water-scrubbed streets, to the ornately magnificent cathedral, and then to the port. There you may chance to see the wind snatch a green shawl off a beautiful girl, as slender as a lily – I do not insist on the comparison – and take the shawl out to sea. And the girl will laugh and press her black, glossy hair to her temples with her hands, to prevent the wind from ruffling it.

It was a fascinating and yet a difficult game, this guide-book

travelling. It was built entirely on imagination. It brought joy to begin with, and disappointment later. The disappointment was caused by the desire which the guide books aroused for the impossible.

But, even so, be kind to imagination! Do not avoid it. Do not persecute it or check it or, least of all, feel embarrassed by it as if it were a poor relation. It is the beggar who hides the countless treasures of Goleonda.

Legends (the folklore kind) have long been linked in my mind with guides. I sometimes imagine that these legends have been specially invented for the benefit of guides who can then amuse the tourists with their babble.

All wearing the same white felt hats with little ribbons and tassels, carrying the same cherry-wood walking sticks with 'Souvenir from Sochi' or 'Greetings from Simeiz' inscribed in poker-work, tourists wander in sweaty crowds round various sights and try to remember as many legends as they can.

The tourists' rucksacks are stuffed with souvenirs, for the most part post-cards and photograph frames, with sea-shells pasted on.

In place of these shells the tourists bring home some flaky mother-of-pearl dust and a few vague impressions. But this does not restrain them in their stubborn zeal from examining all the sights 'according to plan', without, in fact, seeing anything properly or really learning anything.

I am all for tourism, but without the vulgarity which often surrounds it.

I have again destroyed the logical continuity of my narrative. It is my unruly memory which is to blame. I beg forgiveness, and go back to the original point in order to move forward again. I go back to the maps with their short and laconic explanations – 'legends'. Or rather I go back to the 'legend' of Sukhum, to its topographical description, but I shall mention only such places as will in one way or another play some part in the unfolding story.

The point of departure for my topographical description will be the house and garden of Mademoiselle Henriette Jaloux, where I lived in Sukhum.

I shall arrange my description along radial lines running away

from this small house and garden, where a good-natured banana tree with pale-green elephantine ears grew underneath my window.

But before starting on this description I shall say a few words about how I stayed in Sukhum.

Until the *Pestel* left Sukhum for Poti I kept as far from the sea-front as possible. I was convinced I would be caught and expelled from Sukhum.

Thus I reached Mount Chernyavsky and the secluded house, the last on that mountain, of Henriette Jaloux.

Although I had no things of any kind with me, the old lady readily allowed me to rent a room. Its walls were infested with furry centipedes.

In the evening, when the danger had passed, I decided to go down to the town and have dinner in a dukhan. There, an old man, small and scraggy, wearing thick glasses and a grey cherkeska which was too long for him, was executing a dashing *lezghinka*[3] on the sticky, wine-drenched floorboards.

His friends, sitting at a small table, were clapping their hands, out of the kindness of their hearts, while the innkeeper was clicking away on an abacus without paying the slightest attention to the old man who was so conscientiously enjoying himself.

When he had finished dancing the old man invited me to his table. He had immediately recognized me as a visitor. Contrary to what I had surmised, the old man was quite sober and had nothing to do with Abkhazians or any other hill tribes. He turned out to be a Tiflis Jew called Ryvkin. He was working in the Cooperative Union of Abkhazia in Sukhum – the Absouyz – and simply liked dancing the lezghinka in his free time.

He immediately invited me to join the Absouyz and deal with the business correspondence. In general, I was hellishly lucky in Sukhum.

But let us go back to our topography.

In the middle of Mademoiselle Jaloux's garden and level with the ground there was a deep, cement-lined tank to collect rain-water. Spring rains gave Mademoiselle Jaloux enough water to last almost till the autumn. Palms, with leaves like mighty fans, grew round the tank.

Next to Henriette's garden was a small field, covered with yellow and mauve immortelles. Occasionally, snakes would crawl through the field.

On the far side of the field stood a Mingrelian house on stilts and with a long wooden balcony. The doors and windows of that house were boarded up with planks nailed cross-wise to them, and all around there was such a jungle of cherry trees and blackthorn that it was almost impossible to get anywhere near the house.

Behind the house was a thick growth of azalias. There angry bumblebees imitated all day long a whole band of doodle players.

Behind this growth of azalias, somewhere in the multi-coloured smoke, in the patches of sunlight which darted (together with the shadows) across the mountain tops and the bottomless abysses, in the glaciers' twisted glitter, in the trembling foliage, in the vast piles of white cloud which exploded and billowed over the summits of the Great Caucasus, lay the mysterious, magnetic and frightening country where Odoyevsky[4] had perished, where Shamil[5] had fought under the Prophet's green flag, where Bestuzhev-Marlinsky[6] had been killed, where Lermontov[7] had pined and mocked.

At times it seemed to me I could see it all. I saw the Caucasus in the days of its conquest – the faded greatcoats and cap bands, the brown faces, the rancid pipes, the brass of sword hilts, the road blocks made of prickly branches, the rapid snakes of powder smoke – I saw the whole of that warring and 'thrice damned Caucasus'.

I saw 'the silver crown' of the impregnable mountains, 'nature's thrones from which the purple clouds escape like smoke.' All this has been said by Lermontov in perfect conformity with his bitter love and nostalgia.

There, on Mount Chernyavsky, I sometimes felt myself to be in the midst of Lermontov's restless Caucasus. Or rather, that is how I wanted to feel. And life, following its bad habit of conniving at the dreams of dreamers, generously rewarded me with aspects of that far-off Caucasus.

Not far from Henriette's house I stumbled on a rough-hewn

oblong stone. It was so thickly covered with yellow lichen that the inscription which had once been made on it was no longer legible .... Perhaps Odoyevsky had been buried there? Or was it the grave of some unknown rifleman? Who could know?

In any case, it became an excuse for bringing flowers to that grave (they were picked at and taken away by the birds) and for sitting on the ground with one elbow propped up against the stone while looking at a tiny lizard which one had just caught and which was panting apprehensively in one's hand.

Occasionally, a thunderstorm would descend from the mountains. With an insolent crash it would tear the black sky with lightning and would roll a bank of yellow clouds in front of it like a turbid wave.

Tornadoes would whirl over the sea like gigantic tops, would bend and then, all at once, would fall with their full weight on the surface of the water as if they had suddenly stumbled. Then the sea would boil.

Waterfalls roared and rushed through mountain gorges, dislodging boulders of rock. The sea would become black and threatening. The wind would cause the rain to fall in slanting streams which hardly touched the ground. And then suddenly and unexpectedly, sunshine, wet and hot, would burst out like an explosion. Several rainbows, with one end firmly fixed in the roots of the mountains, would raise to the sky in one smooth jet myriads of tiny sparks of water. The thunderstorm was over.

The thunderstorms were followed by a suffocating steam which hung over Sukhum. Henriette would close all the windows. She used to say that the fumes bred invisible miasmas. There were so many of them that they impeded breathing.

According to Henriette, the miasmas caused malaria, palpitations of the heart and rheumatic pains.

The atmosphere was so close that everything able to give out moisture was drenched in sweat. Everything was wet and shone as if just taken out of the water – leaves, fences, rocks, and tiled roofs. Sweat ran in streams down one's hair and behind one's collar, and it poured down palm leaves as if they were little drainpipes.

After one such thunderstorm I felt, for the first time, an acute

difficulty in breathing as if someone had poured lead into my lungs. Those were the first symptoms of asthma, pitiless asthma which leaves a man a quarter of his breath to breathe with, a quarter of his voice to speak with, a quarter of his pace to walk at, a quarter of his brain to think with, and his full – not a quarter – capacity for choking and gasping.

Now that many years have passed, I want to note down my first precise impressions of the Caucasus and of Sukhum. But on reading what I have already put down, I see that these impressions are hasty and somewhat incoherent, although not devoid of the feeling of unity of time and place.

This is obviously due to the short-lived and strange weakening of the sense of reality which overcame me at the beginning of my life in Sukhum.

The break was too great between the hungry and icy northern coast of the Black Sea and this mimosa-scented land with its generous soil and climate.

It was a generous and incomprehensible country. The centuries had forged an amazing way of life. The country was imprisoned in it as in a suit of armour.

Everything appeared strange here.

Whenever Prince Shervashidze entered a dukhan, the other customers would rise from their seats out of sheer habit.

The teacher and writer Dmitri Gulia – the educator of Abkhazia – created Abkhazia's written language and opened the first mobile theatre placed on native carts.

There was as yet no Soviet money there. Turkish liras constituted the ordinary currency.

A Scottish boat came to get Sukhum tobacco and in exchange left barrels of Atlantic herring. It was followed by a Japanese boat which brought lots of rice and cane sugar. Instead of wages employees were therefore given foodstuffs. In addition, every two days employees received twenty pints of excellent wine and a packet of the valuable 'Trebizond' tobacco; it was too strong and expensive. People blended it with ordinary tobacco to improve the taste.

Hill bears – little cubs – were sold in the bazaar at a rouble a-piece, and so were stone-hard Moscow bread rolls (*baranki*) made, presumably, before the Revolution. The baranki cost a fabulous price.

Bamboo shoots broke up the surface of streets. In one night they grew a metre or more. Blood feuds never ceased. In villages elders still met to deliver judgment.

It was difficult to grasp what century we were living in. For the first congress of Soviets, the inhabitants of Samurzakan – Abkhazia's most unruly province – elected their worthiest representatives: those who could steal the most hot-blooded steed. It was this that constituted real valour in the eyes of old Samurzakanis at the time; not for them the bending of backs in maize fields and tobacco plantations.

In Sukhum there were no external traces of war. The country remained as untouched as fifty years back.

One unexpected sign of the late war was Henri Barbusse's book *Fire*, which by some miracle had found its way to Sukhum.

It was Ryvkin who happened to have the first copy of this book. I immediately confiscated it. Ryvkin put up not the slightest resistance.

I read this manly and intensely human story of Barbusse, as virile as a soldier's marching gait, in my garden, sitting in the shade of the banana tree. Occasionally I raised my eyes. I needed time to realise that I was not in the fields of Champagne or the Ardennes, where, in the rain-sodden trenches, the two armies – the French and the German – were closely interlocked and the soldiers were drowning in the mud. I needed time to switch from the fields of France to this land, so headily aromatic, so gay and luxuriant in the sun.

In moments like these it seemed particularly alien to me – dreary, for all its coating of veneer.

I had been haunted for some time by the feeling that the country was in some way threatening me. It was a threat I felt especially acutely at sunset. Thin streams of cold air, like sharp claws, dug themselves into the hot and close atmosphere and gave rise to slight fits of shivering.

I was most impressed with Barbusse's book, particularly with the last pages where soldiers, rooted to the ground, talk of world justice. Liebknecht's name unexpectedly flares up in their conversation as a real and early hope for the coming of new times.

Every time I reached that passage, I experienced a deep-seated excitement and for some reason began thinking about myself. Was I moving forward or was I becoming static? Judging by the fact that I was questioning my own self, I was still alive. This set my mind at rest.

5
The Deserted House

At that time a row of dukhans, dark and squat, stretched along the quay-side of Sukhum. They had extraordinary names: 'The Green Mackerel', 'Lunch as You Go', 'Men's Rest', 'Queen Tamara', 'Stop, friend'.

Every dukhan had a notice printed in large letters, hanging on a wall: 'No credit to anyone!' In only one dukhan was this inexorable warning expressed more politely: 'Credit spoils relationships.'

The barber's shop also had its notice: 'No lotions on credit.'

These notices about credit hung everywhere, even the street kebbab-vendors had them. They cooked kebbabs on intricate-looking contraptions. Tin frying pans with holes in them, were soldered, one on top of the other, on to a central iron rod. Chunks of mutton, tomatoes and slices of onion were put in the pans. A heap of blazing coals was stacked underneath them, the iron rod was pivoted round and the kebbabs turned and fried in the hot juice of onions and tomatoes and in their own fat, and sent out billows of acrid smoke which spread throughout Sukhum. At times this smoke penetrated as far as the port. It made one's throat feel sore.

The notices about credit were merely a picturesque detail of life in Sukhum. In actual fact the customers in all dukhans had always eaten and drunk on credit since the time of Queen Tamara. Any attempt to pay one's bill on the spot left the dukhan keepers completely bewildered. It remained a perfect mystery, therefore, who had thought up that slogan and pasted the notices about credit all over Sukhum.

Bearded water carriers with loud voices wandered along the quay with little barrels of cold water. Every water carrier also had a board with a warning about credit hanging from his barrel. Even boot-blacks hung up this warning next to their smart-looking boxes.

Every boot-black decorated his box with picture-postcards, little bells and portraits of either Venizelos or the Catholicos, depending on his nationality.

The boot-blacks were divided into old men and boys. There were no middle-aged men among them.

In the morning Sukhumis were roused from their sleep by a nerve-wracking banging on boxes, like so many drums. It was the shoe-shine boys taking up their positions and beating out with great gusto the rhythm of the song so popular at the time:

A hungry crocodile
Had jumped over a stile –
And was roaming round the streets.

The old men merely shook their heads in disapproval.

One of the old men was an ancient Kurd, the very patriarch of all boot-blacks. It was said that he had been sitting for the last thirty years on the same spot near the landing pier. Huge brushes went softly forwards and backwards in his hands. The final gloss he put on with a casual and fleeting application of a red velvet rag.

Everyone treated that Kurd with great respect. Even the *Pestel*'s captain used to shake hands with him.

And it was this old man's fate to play a cruel part in the story of the boarded-up house, the house that stood in the immediate proximity of Henriette's garden.

The old woman told me the story of that house. There were two families in Sukhum at war with each other. The feud ended with one of the families having only one male survivor – Henriette's neighbour. In 1900, to escape inevitable death, the man and his wife fled to Turkey.

This sort of thing did not always save people. Henriette could remember one case when a man fleeing from the vengeance of his enemies was found as far away as America and shot there.

The family at war with Henriette's neighbours who had fled to

Turkey, soon left Sukhum to live in Tsebelda and the feud died out through lack of fresh fuel.

According to the popular beliefs of the Abkhazians a house connected with a blood feud was considered to have a curse on it. Usually, it was boarded up and no one would live in it.

'Cursed' houses gradually disintegrated with age. Finally they were demolished and pulled down.

After Henriette's story I came to look at the empty house in a different way. I began to notice sinister things about it.

Great numbers of bats lived (or rather slept hanging upside down) in the attic. In the evening they would wake up and fly frantically right up in front of one's face uttering shrill little squeaks. The knots in the wooden planks of the walls had rotted and gave out a faint light. They looked like eyes, malicious and green. Day and night death-watch beetles assiduously gnawed at the wooden walls of the house. It was obviously due to collapse in the near future.

One day I happened to be delayed in town. On my way from the Absoyuz I went to the office of a small Sukhumi newspaper and there wrote a short and passionate article attacking the blood feud. The editor kept clicking his tongue as he read it.

'We can't publish it,' he said at last and smacked his hand down on the manuscript. 'You see, my dear fellow, one can't take away from people what they are used to so suddenly. For thousands of years they've been carving each other up, my dear fellow, and then all of a sudden – finish, not allowed! You needn't believe me, my dear fellow, but I swear by my daughter that the author of the article will be immediately murdered on the threshold of this office. You understand that I, as editor, can't allow this to happen.'

Having failed to get my way with the editor, I went. I left him in a state of cheerless reflection. He wrinkled his brow and scratched himself behind one ear with a blue pencil.

Outside, through the window, one could see laurel bushes stirring in the wind.

I went home. I always walked slowly, taking deep breaths – I was quite unable to get used to the tangy smells of Abkhazian nights.

At the turning of the road to my house I stopped.

I stopped because an oil lamp was throwing its light on the cliff along which I always passed at night touching it with my hand so as not to lose the way and fall into the precipice below.

I looked up.

The abandoned house was open, all the boards had been ripped off the windows and doors, and the rooms were ablaze with lamps. Somebody, a newcomer evidently, had disregarded Abkhazian superstitions and had boldly thrown open the house.

Henriette was standing at the gate. She seized me by the hand and said breathlessly:

'Hurry! *Plus vite, plus vite*! Please!'

She was trembling and her voice shook.

'What's happened?' I asked in a panic.

'Hurry!' she repeated in a loud whisper, staggered and clutched the fence for support. 'Good God, what a disaster! Hurry, run! I beseech you.'

'Where?' I asked completely bewildered.

'He's come back from Turkey,' said Henriette loudly. And I was seized with fear because she was trembling more and more. It struck me that she might be starting a fit of hysteria.

'He came back from Turkey this afternoon,' she repeated clearly and loudly. 'Run quickly to the police station and tell them he has come back. He is called Chachba. Good God, what a disaster!'

Quite stunned, too bewildered to understand anything properly, I almost ran down Mount Chernyavsky.

In the courtyard of the police station three policemen sitting at a low table were playing cards in the light of an oil lamp. Their sinewy horses, saddled and tethered to palms by the side of the fence, were munching loudly.

The policemen were so intent on their game that they did not even glance up at me. I came up and told them that someone by the name of Chachba had this day returned from Turkey and moved into the boarded-up house on Mount Chernyavsky.

I did not have time to finish my sentence. The policemen jumped up and dashed to their horses. They began hurriedly untethering them while shouting something in their guttural accents

to the duty officer who was leaning out of the window. Then they jumped into their saddles and were off with a furious clatter of hooves in the direction of Mount Chernyavsky. Sparks flew from under their horses' hooves in all directions. The night was suddenly filled with the smell of gunpowder and blood.

I rushed after the policemen. But half-way to the mountain I met them again as they galloped just as furiously past me, on their way back into town. I hardly had time to jump down into a ditch by the side of the road.

The cursed house was lit up as brightly as ever. The lamps were smoking.

A man with grey hair and a kind face was lying with his arms spread out on the verandah next to the staircase. Blood was still trickling from a hole in his chest and dripping softly and slowly down the steps.

A good-looking, middle-aged woman was sitting on the floor beside the dead man. She was pressing a boy, aged about five, to her breast and looking straight in front of her. As I approached, I crossed the line of her motionless gaze and shuddered – never yet had I seen such frenzied hatred in human eyes.

It was obvious that as soon as that little boy grew up the woman would send him out to avenge his father. And nothing in this world could soften her heart and make her give up the desire to spill more blood.

Henriette Jaloux had been right to hurry me. The policemen arrived too late.

A few days later, when the woman and the boy had disappeared (it was said that, fearing for the fate of her son, she had fled to Rostov-on-Don), the truth was finally established.

Chachba had returned on a Turkish cargo ship from Trapezund. On the landing-jetty he was immediately recognized by the old Kurd – the boot-black. He gave Chachba a scrutinizing look and slowly lifted his hand to his forehead.

Chachba had his boots cleaned by the Kurd. From sheer joy at returning to his native land after more than twenty years, Chachba prattled on with the boot-black. He said that now that the war and the revolution were both over, things must have entirely changed

in Abkhazia. Men no longer killed each other for the sake of revenge. They had grown wiser and were living in friendship and happiness.

From time to time the boot-black would nod a reluctant assent and keep glancing from side to side. But Chachba was happy and never noticed the boot-black's sullen looks or his restless eyes.

As soon as Chachba had loaded his things on to a cart and driven off to Mount Chernyavsky, the boot-black slowly made his way to the bazaar. It had, at the time, a great many courtyards, tortuous, and meandering like a maze, where one could get lost a few steps away from the street.

The whole thing was a cluster of wooden hovels and innumerable little sheds where primus stoves whistled and hissed, cobblers tapped with their hammers, blow lamps roared, vomiting forth a blue flame, men brewed thick Turkish coffee and slapped greasy cards on sticky table tops, women with flowing hair screamed as they accused their lazy and scornful husbands of all the deadly sins, dignified ancients in puttees and soldiers' boots spoke to each other like old eagles in their guttural tongue; and, suddenly, through all this chaos and noise, would pass a tall, strikingly good-looking young man, softly swaying on his leather-stockinged legs, dressed in a cherkeska with broad, flapping sleeves and looking round him with that languid gaze which made women feel giddy.

The Kurd waited till he saw just such a man as this, and then said something to him in a whisper.

'Very good, *batono*,'[8] – replied the young man in a low voice. 'You'll get your hundred liras to-morrow.'

He turned his langorous gaze around him, left and right, clenched the hilt of his dagger in his lean, brown fingers and leapt softly into the street like a wild cat on his springy legs.

Ten minutes later, bent low over the pommel of his saddle, he was galloping to Tsebelda, to bring to the inhabitants of a certain house in that village the staggering news that Chachba, the enemy who had escaped their vengeance, had returned to Abkhazia.

Immediately, two men galloped off from Tsebelda to the boarded-up house on Mount Chernyavsky near Sukhum.

Scarcely bothering to rein in their fiery steeds and holding their

sawn-off guns at the ready, they called to Chachba to come out on the verandah. He came out unarmed, stretched out both his arms to his erstwhile enemies and fell, killed on the spot, with his kind old arms stretched out in reconciliation.

The murderers were, of course, never found. They galloped off to Svanetia where only armed detachments could penetrate at that time.

A few days later someone set fire to the cursed house. It happened in the morning, and by midday the house was burned to a cinder. There was no wind. The fire went straight up to the sky without spreading outwards. A smell of burning hung around our place for several days, but soon its place was taken by the usual strong odour of azalias.

6

The Mail Coach

To this first case of a blood feud which I saw with my own eyes was soon added a second. In my memory these two cases remained joined and somehow merged. Hence, I am writing about them without a break in the sequence of time.

Between Sukhum and New Athos there was at that time a so-called mail coach service. It represented the only means of communication with the Athos monastery.

Before the war there were also stage-coaches, known as *diligences,* which plied up and down the Caucasian coast.

A *diligence* looked like a cumbrous private coach (or a sort of passenger cart). It had four horses harnessed to it. The passengers huddled close together inside the coach and on its roof.

The coach also had seating accommodation for two passengers outside at the rear: two small iron seats without a support for the feet. There were also iron handlebars for the passengers to hold on to and save them from being jolted clean out of the vehicle and precipitated onto the road.

I had seen such stage coaches in Kiev when I was a boy. They used to go to Zhitomir, were painted yellow and sported a shiny brass Post Office badge – two crossed post horns and two intersecting streaks of lightning. The streaks of lightning were obviously meant to indicate the presence of electricity in telegraphic communications.

These dim and distant days bring back to me the memory of the unhappy rear passengers, shaking on their hard seats, With one hand they held on convulsively to the iron handle bar, and with the

other tried to keep their cap or bowler hat from falling. Their eyes reflected dumb despair.

As a result of the merciless jolting the clothes of these passengers were all unbuttoned and untied. Never once did I see them without the laces of their underpants hanging out of their trousers, and their jackets bundling themselves up to form a hump behind their necks.

We boys were convinced that only swindlers and jobbers travelled as rear passengers. But in spite of the unimaginable torments which these passengers suffered under our very eyes, we envied them all the same.

I, for instance, dreamed of spending the kopecks, saved out of the money my parents doled out to me for lunches, on a ticket to Zhitomir by stage coach, to go rattling along among the pine woods, rumbling over rickety bridges which spanned the small rivers in the marshlands, defending myself against furious village dogs by kicking out at them with my feet.

As the rear passengers had no support for their feet, their legs dangled from side to side and terribly irritated the dogs.

Such was the stage coach – broad, roomy, majestic even in its clumsiness.

Compared to a stage coach, the so-called mail coach (an ordinary brake for six, with passengers sitting back to back) appeared a frail enough contraption, all rattling from sheer lack of self-assurance, but with pretensions to some elegance. However down-at-heel, it always had a canvas awning, with red velvet pompons along its edges, stretched out on two iron pintles as a protection against the sun.

It was in a mail coach such as this that Babel[9] and I were one day travelling from Sukhum to New Athos. Babel had by that time left Odessa for Batum and was living there, deep in the luxuriant tropical undergrowth of Cape Zeleny.

How it was that Babel happened to be in Sukhum for a few days I do not remember. Suffice it to say that Babel's inquisitiveness demolished all obstacles.

And so, we were travelling to New Athos with a few companions. Among them was a fat, snub-nosed man in a small

jockey cap. He was making his way to New Athos in the hope of getting a job as an accountant.

Apart from the snub-nosed man there was also an obese, cow-eyed young woman in a tight black dress. At every hole in the road the dress gave out an ominous cracking noise. Every time this happened the girl would utter a little frightened cry: 'Ooy-meh!' she would scream, and stretch her dress over her knee-caps, each the size of an average pumpkin.

Beside her sat a weak-sighted youth, an intellectual type in gold-rimmed pince-nez. When at the bends in the road the vehicle tilted sideways the young man's feet would slither off the foot-board and trail along the ground raising thick clouds of dust.

He explained to us, without any prompting on our part, that he had inherited the pince-nez from his grandfather, Sukhum's only dentist, and that he was going to the monastery in the hope of staying there as a chorister. He had, he said, a very high tenor and they fed you jolly well in the monastery and sometimes even gave you jellied fish.

The last passenger was a man of indeterminate age with a sallow face and wearing a soldier's faded tunic. To all our questions he gave reluctant and unintelligible answers and we decided to leave him alone.

The reader may think – so detailed is my description of our travelling companions – that all these people will turn out to be the principal characters in later events. Nothing of the sort. None of them will turn out to be a principal character in anything. My circumstantial descriptions are due merely to the fact that Babel used to give imitations of these people later. I laughed till I cried. This is why I remembered them so well.

We travelled with no undue haste, enjoying the heat and the ripe mulberries. They were spread on the road like a thick carpet.

Occasionally we would pass buffaloes, drawing native carts. Always I had the impression that the buffaloes were going backwards rather than forwards: so slowly and reluctantly did they move their legs.

Every time we met the buffaloes the young man in pince-nez would repeat the same phrase, quoting either Fenimore Cooper or

Mayne Reid: 'When a herd of buffaloes swish their tails to chase away the flies, a violent wind rages over the prairie.'

And the driver, an old Mingrelian, merely smacked his lips in admiration.

'Oh, you do speak beautifully, *katso*[10]! Just the way they do in songs!'

Thus we went on, half-asleep in the summer day, blinded by the white brilliance of the sea, not expecting anything to happen. But it did, and, as always, very suddenly.

It began with the sound of a horse's hooves overtaking us from behind.

We looked round. We were being caught up by a young horseman of quite improbable beauty – brown-skinned, slender and langorous like a houri.

The horseman wore a wine-red cherkeska which fitted him tightly, like a corset, and had a bandoleer with ivory-tipped cartridge caps. A small cap was pushed down over his eyes. Apart from a dagger, there was also a heavy revolver hanging at his side.

His black horse went past us quickly at a rapid trot. The horseman was followed by his orderly, covered with dust from head to foot.

When the horseman was level with us we saw his set, motionless face and his frantic eyes staring fixedly in front of them, like a blind man's

'Inal-Ipa!' said our driver in a low voice. 'Big boss! Commissar!'

'Commissar of what?' asked Babel.

'Extraordinary Commission[11]' said the driver winking at us with a mysterious air. 'Commission! Extraordinary!'

'Ooy-meh!' cried the girl with great respect in her voice, and pulled down her dress over her mighty knees.

We were all excited by the encounter, except the man in the tunic. He rolled himself a cigarette, lit it, inhaled, and drawled out:

'Seen finer birds than this in my life. . . .'

He stopped short and lapsed into silence. We were approaching the village of Eshery. It lay half-way between Sukhum and New Athos.

From it came the crackle of pistol shots. Then a desperate

scream of many people seemed to spurt up to the sky. The scream was followed by the hurried crack and rattle of shots being exchanged, and a bullet hit the road close to us, ricocheted off it, gave a short, high-pitched squeak and disappeared in a streak of dust.

The snub-nosed man jumped off the brake and darted behind the bushes. The driver started nervously pulling at the reins and turned off the road into the ditch. The mail coach leaned over to one side. One of its wheels was hanging in mid-air.

'Ooy-meh!' screamed the girl, tucked her legs up and snuggled up to the lanky youth.

Several bullets whistled friskily over our heads and we again heard the clatter of hooves. Now it was furious, frantic. It seemed as if the horseshoes were coming off the hooves as a result of this impetuous gallop and were scudding whistling along the road.

'Looks like shooting,' said the man in the tunic, mournfully. 'We should go and lie down behind a rock, really.'

But he never moved.

Babel took off his glasses and burst out laughing: his face became covered with wrinkles, especially round the eyes.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'A complete chapter,' he replied, interrupting himself in order to cough, 'out of Nemirovich-Danchenko's novel *Legends of gunpowder and grey smoke*. Or else out of yet another of his novels. . . .'

But Babel had no time to say which other Nemirovich-Danchenko novel this chapter was out of. Clearly, the chapter was not finished yet. Babel stopped because, like all of us, he saw Inal-Ipa riding furiously towards us, this time, away from Eshery, and looking entirely different to what he had looked five minutes before.

He had lost his cap. His hair was all tangled and fell over his eyes. He was hitting his horse on its wet, sinewy neck with the butt end of his revolver. The horse was bearing him towards us at a furious gallop, somehow sideways, as if looking round all the time.

Inal-Ipa's orderly was careering behind him and shooting at the same time.

The riders rushed past us with the speed of ghosts. The shooting ceased. Our driver got up from the ground and made the sign of the cross.

'It looks as if there is a rising in Eshery,' remarked the man in the tunic. 'The hill tribes here are used to this sort of thing.'

None of us could make it out. We had to decide what to do, whether to proceed to New Athos via Eshery or return to Sukhum.

The man with the snub-nose came out from behind his bush and started back on his way to Sukhum, without waiting for a general decision.

'Ooy-meh!' cried the girl in great wrath and spat generously after his receding figure.

Her spitting clinched the matter. We decided to continue on our way. All wanted to know what had happened in Eshery. The driver heaved a sigh and the mail coach, all its loose bolts rattling, moved forward towards its unknown fate.

Past the first bend of the road we met armed Esheryans. They did not stop us and asked no questions. Possibly, they never even noticed us, so excited were they.

In Eshery the whole population was out in the street. The women were standing on the thresholds of their houses wailing, tearing their hair and scratching their faces till the blood ran. Children were rushing to the village square. In the middle of the square grew an immense elm. The men were hurrying in the same direction, towards the elm, furiously gesticulating and discharging sawn-off guns and carbines into the air as they went.

Under the elm lay a young boy, aged about fifteen, not more. His head was leaning against a saddle.

The boy's shirt was torn at the chest, and a pool of blood had gathered in the little hollow just above his sunken stomach.

The boy was dead. Round him stood the village elders leaning on knotty staffs. They were looking at the dead boy and saying nothing. The men who came up to the victim also fell silent, and only from time to time someone would raise his fist above his head and utter a guttural and sinister cry – presumably a curse on the assassin.

A little girl in a long black skirt sat next to the dead boy and,

without ever taking her eyes off him, chased flies off his face with a broken-off twig.

Our driver spoke to the Esheryans. As he listened to their replies, he made an exaggerated show of lamentation, beat his dusty breeches with his hands and rolled his eyes unnaturally. One could see the brown-tinged whites of his eyes as he did so.

At that time the Soviet People's Court did not yet function in all Abkhazian localities. In most villages judgment was still meted out by the Elders. Custom and common sense took the place of law.

The Court of the Elders always met under some ancient sacred tree – an oak or an elm.

That morning the Elders met to judge the youth who had stolen a saddle.

We came up to the dead boy. He had the tender profile of an Italian. The girl was waving the branch over his head as if she had been wound up with a key. Sometimes the branch would brush against the wide stirrup on the saddle and we could then hear a soft ringing sound. It reminded one of the long, measured tolling of a funeral bell.

Inal-Ipa had heard of the theft of the saddle and had galloped off to Eshery from Sukhum in order to be present at the trial.

There he met his bitterest enemies, the princes Emukhvari.

What happened next nobody could tell us in detail. The brothers Emukhvari and Inal-Ipa started shooting at each other. The youth who had stolen the saddle got killed in the shooting affray.

The Emukhvaris shouted that the youth was killed by Inal-Ipa in defiance of the law and in violation of the Court of the Elders. He had shot the youth, they said, because his clan was having a blood feud with the boy's clan.

The men seized their arms. But Inal-Ipa escaped on his horse.

After Eshery the road became impracticable. We got off the mail coach and continued on foot.

The day seemed to be totally immersed in silence. Even the cicadas were still and the heat made no sound. Usually it gives out a quiet squeak like water percolating through a narrow crack.

The sea, warmed by the sun, was silent, too. It was gradually being veiled over by a haze.

The monastery was deserted. Goldfish swam in small cement-lined ponds into which water was diverted from a mountain stream to water the garden. Obviously, they were hungry because they immediately flocked in shoals to the side of the pond where they saw people. All around there was a churchy smell of warm cypresses.

Services were still held in the cathedral, but only a few monks remained in the monastery. In command of them was the father-cellarer – red-haired, pock-marked, with a fastidious manner of speech.

He took us into an empty, echoing hostel and gave us a room. The obese girl said good-bye and went off to her brother in some village, the youth in pince-nez and the man in the tunic disappeared.

'You are educated people,' said the cellarer, after looking at our papers, 'and I must ask you to respect certain restrictions. A certain Mrs Nelidov is staying in the room next to yours. There is no one else in the hostel. She came to us in order to rest from the iniquities and the evil of this world. Herself a woman of the world, but monastically inclined. She came here from Sukhum on foot. To fulfil a vow. She follows all the rules and is very strict. She is dressed in black like a nun.'

'Ye-es,' said Babel. 'Made of steel, the old girl, obviously.'

The father cellarer smiled.

'Good Heavens, citizens!' he said reproachfully, 'she is hardly thirty yet. A most attractive lady. But I warn you: she is strict.'

The cellarer gave us a long sideways look and said in a business-like tone:

'In our refectory, young men, you can obtain bread and jellied fish, and some madjarka wine in my store room. You are cordially invited! I am the wine keeper and a wine-maker too, so I can guarantee the quality of the madjarka. Current events preclude us from making any other wine for the moment.'

There are all kinds of wine in the world, but never have I met one as fantastic as madjarka.

We had all sorts of unholy visions during our stay in New Athos and the fault lies definitely with this somewhat cloudy wine. And also perhaps with our attempts to convince ourselves that no earthly worries could possibly find their way there, even in that ill-starred mail coach.

We had many talks together, Babel and I, in that monastery hostel and came finally to the conclusion that man was never sufficiently care-free. We were young then, fond of jesting, and liked thinking that way.

When a man is care-free all the fine things of this world seem close to him and often merge into one frothy, glittering torrent – all the fine things: laughter and meditation, a sparkling jest and a tender word which sends a woman's lips a-twitching, poetry and fearlessness, songs and extracts from favourite books – and much else besides, which I have no time to enumerate here.

We decided to fortify our youth and liking for invention with young wine – madjarka. It is a poor man's wine, very cheap. Its effect lasts from morn till night. And then, early next morning a glass of cold water (from a brook, preferably) is enough to start again the feeling of drunkeness which lasts almost the whole day. It is then a particularly lucid kind of drunkenness.

Anyhow, I went to the father cellarer and brought back to our room – reeking of sour cabbage – five bottles of madjarka.

In the dark passage on my way back with the bottles, I met a young nun. The surprise of it made me drop a bottle.

The young nun did not bat an eyelid. She went past me with drooping eyelashes of inordinate length, and her black cashmere dress accidently touched my hand. I caught a whiff of aromatic warmth.

The nun slightly swayed on her high hips. I was unable in the half-light to make out the features of her face. I noticed only that it had that matt, pale complexion which had always been considered as the essential condition of female beauty (hence, obviously, the use of powder). Nor did I notice her hair – it was concealed under a black headkerchief.

As she moved away I thought I heard her utter a short sound like that of stifled laughter.

The fact was that while I was in his store-room the father cellarer let me taste his madjarka. We had a good full glass each and I therefore put down my agitation at meeting the young nun – she was, of course, the Nelidov girl – to the rapid effect of the wine.

The noise made by the bottle as it fell and rolled away made Babel open the door of our room and peer into the passage.

'There!' he said triumphantly, 'I just *knew* you were going to break. . . .'

But he never finished his sentence, stopped short and gazed at the other end of the corridor.

It was illuminated by the gleam of the setting sun, and in its radiant haze a young woman was walking away from us, swaying slightly as she went.

'The apotheosis of woman!' said Babel suddenly. 'A banal word – "apotheosis," but if only I had nerves sufficiently sensitive I'd write such a thing for the glorification of woman that the Black Sea from New Athos to Ochechmiry would be covered with pink foam. And out of it would step another – a Russian – Aphrodite. And you and I – stupid, poor, dusty, corroded by the canker of civilization – would welcome her appearance with tears. And we should experience the happiness of merely touching with deep reverence no more than the nail of her small toe. The nail of her small toe.'

'Bunkum!' I said to Babel. 'You haven't even drunk any madjarka yet.'

'Bunkum, of course!' he replied and threw open the window. 'Come here, now.'

From the cracked window-frame fell a shower of dried-up flies and moths.

And immediately through the window came the majestic voice of the sea, produced by thousands of lapping waves. They seemed to rock the golden heat of the setting sun. They bore the smell of marble and of olives, of mountain slopes covered with grass burnt to a cinder, and of islands where rustle the leaves of sycamores, their fragrance preserved for centuries and thousands of years in the vastness of the waters.

'Whom, I thought, should we thank for this miracle – for life itself – which we have been so generously given?'

I do not know if my thoughts were quite as smoothly expressed as they are expressed here. In fact, quite definitely not, but they could have been.

I sat on the window-sill and contemplated the sunset. And it seemed to me that I was the happiest man in the world, unfairly so, even.

We never got to know the Nelidov girl, after all: a motor-boat, the *Lev Tolstoy*, was leaving for Sukhum the very next day and as we were afraid of getting stuck in New Athos, we left with it without any great feelings of regret.

The mountains pressed the monastery too close to the sea, crowded in upon it, almost pushed it into the water. The hostel smelled of w.c.s and rancid vegetable oil. The cathedral was decorated with sugarish frescoes of scenes from the Old and the New Testament. They represented men in pink and powder-blue clothes, their eyes raised to the dome above. A sullen, grey-haired Lord of Hosts soared over them, sitting there on a plump cloud. A pair of fat legs and feet in ordinary leather sandals protruded from underneath his cloak. The artist obviously could not bring himself to represent the Lord of Hosts barefoot.

I met Mrs Nelidov once again in the gloomy passage early in the morning of our departure. She had her hair in curlers and exuded a smell of burnt paper, and there was about her no trace of the charm of the day before.

On seeing her slightly swollen face I had a feeling of dull irritation, and Babel said, with a venomous glint in his eyes:

'That's what madjarka wine does, young man.'

Babel stayed only five days in Sukhum before leaving for Batum. And I again remained in agonising solitude.

7
A Cure against Malaria

A noisy and interesting life went on beyond the confines of the tiny Abkhazian republic with its damp and heavy atmosphere and its dense and unfamiliar vegetation. But in our little newspaper which looked like a poster advertising a wandering conjurer, life was reflected merely in a short paragraph or two.

I had the impression that the tropical jungle was making me deaf and the white sun was making me blind. The sun had flooded out of sight the wide open sea in front of my window.

Soon I fell ill with malaria. I had shaking fits every five days. My body smelled of vinegar, quinine caused noises in my head, turned my hands blue and split my nails.

After every attack of malaria, with its relentless shivering and its heart flutterings which seemed to presage death, I was left so debilitatingly weak that I found it difficult to stretch out an arm.

I was tormented by long and monotonous dreams. They stopped short always at the same place and immediately began again with implacable consistency.

I knew everything that was going to happen in my dream. I knew it would break off at the most important point and I should be left waiting for it to return and begin again the same scenes, which, however, grew dimmer with every repetition.

I would groan at night sometimes in my effort to chase away my dreams, but got no respite. Mademoiselle Jaloux considered malaria to be not an illness but an affliction, as if the patient were possessed. She used to say that people ill with malaria lived in their own strange world and nothing could be kept hidden from

them. I tried to write down these dreams, but abandoned the attempt immediately. However, three years ago, rummaging in my old manuscripts, I found narrow strips of paper covered with brown writing, as if the writer had used black coffee instead of ink.

These were the notes I had made of my dreams. But not a single dream was finished.

Every note consisted of a few fragmentary phrases. But on the whole it gave some idea of what the dream was about.

Here are these notes: 'A man's search . . . for a little girl, probably his daughter . . . I never succeeded in catching a glimpse of her. She constantly disappeared in the crowd. I looked for her everywhere. I remember a river at night. Its sinister glitter conveyed the impression that the river had no water, and that in its place flowed acrid-smelling liquid tar.

'A war was going on, I think, and a roll of gun-fire could be heard somewhere behind a forest of factory chimneys and barren hills. But no one paid the slightest attention.

'More often than not, I sought her in the suburbs of some strange and unfamiliar town. Flowers, black with soot, grew in front gardens in the empty light of the street lamps. Suburban night, grey as snake-skin, was never dark.

'I went out into the fields and listened to the feeble, sleepy sound of small, sickly groves. But I saw her nowhere. Perhaps she simply did not exist?

'One night I stopped somewhere in a dry, wind-blown plain. From far away, like a promise of peace and rest came the never-ending roar of the sea. Then, through this roar, I heard the light whimpering of a child by my side. I rushed to her, I saw her pale and very thin face in the dim light of air bombing. I clasped her weak, warm neck, with its protruding little bone at the base, in my damp arms.'

At that point I always screamed and woke up in perspiration.

In the middle of the night I would have to get up and wring out my shirt. In the vague darkness my toe-nails shewed white and every time it surprised me to be able to see them in the dark.

There was no one around me. In those Sukhum nights I felt completely lost in the world and sometimes I was sorry for myself.

The whole of my past life appeared to me as nothing but a series of sorrows and mistakes. I remembered mother, Galya, Lelia, a series of deaths and misfortunes. Even now, at a distance of several years, I did not want to believe in Lelia's death. The very existence of death seemed to me a mockery. I considered that no living beings who felt themselves to be immortal either should or could die.

'Who – I thought – has dared to treat us in such a base and foul manner – us who are able to create within ourselves a world of sentiments, thoughts and events so magnificent that in the face of it reality sometimes bears the aspect of clumsy fiction?' The consciousness of my superiority over nature gave me an odd joy, for all that I knew that nature had a more powerful weapon in its hands than I, a mere man.

I firmly believe in the immortality of thought: thousands of examples crowded in upon me. And sometimes I would regard myself as the creator and the sovereign of a rich world of my own.

I knew for certain that that world was not, like me, subject to decay. That world would last so long as the earth existed. The consciousness of this filled me with inner peace. Very well, I should certainly die, my total disappearance was a question of a short space of time, no more. But Tristan and Isolde, the Sonnets of Shakespeare, Levitan's[12] 'Timber felling seen through a film of rain,' and Chekhov's 'Lady With a Dog' would never die. They would never die, the boundless nocturnal sound of the ocean in Bunin's[13] poem and Natasha Rostov's tears over the dead body of Prince Andrew.

Our descendants would be as deeply moved by all this as we were now. And somewhere, some time, eyes shining with happiness and grief, the eyes of those who would be living centuries after us, would feel the gentle breath, the light touch of our words.

The oftener I thought thus, the more swiftly did bitterness melt away and the more firmly I believed that though I should disappear from this world, I should still be able to leave an eternal, even if insignificant, trace on the face of life.

Occasionally, I would lose all sense of reality. Sukhum with its magnificent twilight, with the heavy gold and sticky blood of its sunsets, with its acrid smell of leaves, which pursued me every-

where seemed to me a town which had found its way here from a strange and nameless country.

I no longer went to the Absoyuz. I just lay on my back for days on end, following the course of my imagination – sometimes smooth and steady and sometimes impetuous and confused. All this ended with the appearance in my room of the energetic comrade Ryvkin, in his grey summer cherkeska and, with him, a sullen-looking young man with crew-cut hair.

The man turned out to be a neuropathologist, the only one in Sukhum. Ryvkin brought him along to get me out of that unhealthy state of unreality to which I was by then becoming accustomed.

'Malarial delirium,' said the young man with the crew-cut in a bored voice. 'If the patient is allowed to offer no resistance to the natural course of the illness the result will be disastrous. Take yourself in hand!'

He took me by the shoulders and gave me such a violent shake that I felt my blood trying to break out of my veins and then flowing heavily back again. It hurt. I groaned. The young doctor – his name was Samoylin – poured into my mouth a spoonful of some blue liquid and told me to take it every day. After this, my saliva and the whites of my eyes turned bright ultramarine.

Malaria began to ebb away from me. The sense of reality came back. But this gave me no particular feeling of joy.

One day Doctor Samoylin said that it was essential I should take a trip, if only for a few days, to the mountains – the Glavny Ridge – where the air was so pure, and in the night, so cold besides, that it tinkled at each movement as if thin slices of ice were being broken all around.

I regarded this suggestion of Samoylin's with some distrust, as I regarded all doctor's orders which seemed to me absurd. I remembered Doctor Landesman in Odessa, at the height of the famine prescribing caviar and oysters sprinkled with lemon juice.

But I liked the doctor's words about the air that broke with a tinkle. At any rate these words reflected an attitude to the world which I fully shared.

I have no hesitation in admitting this to hundreds and thousands of sober-minded, sensible readers.

Apparently conventions are natural to our minds. The truth of the matter is that there are conventions which please us with their facile revelations and other conventions which shackle the free human spirit.

Apparently as a result of malaria, my imagination responded eagerly to all that gave it the least stimulus and flared up in a blaze of colours and tints.

No sooner did I remember Doctor Landesman's advice to sprinkle mythical oysters with lemon juice than I imagined that frozen juice and its little snow pellets like the flowers of a white mimosa (perhaps such a mimosa does grow somewhere in the world). They gave out an intoxicating odour. My gaze penetrated inside these pellets which concealed magic landscapes of microscopic size.

Samoylin took to visiting me often. Sometimes he would bring a mountain bear cub, which he had bought at the bazaar for three roubles. The bear cub would stand on his hind legs and growl with delight and scratch the back of his head with his claws at the sight of the multicoloured little Henriette mincing round him.

Henriette Jaloux dressed somewhat strangely – too vividly and too youthfully for her age. She tied her grey curls with an orange ribbon and when she dug in the garden she hummed bouncing Swiss songs. This used to surprise all her friends, let alone the uncouth little bear cub.

One day Samoylin brought with him a tow-haired individual in a darned sailor's vest, as broad as a cupboard and looking as if riveted together out of inflated iron muscles. He was a wrestler from the local Sukhumi circus by the name of Zatsarenny, an unruffled and easy-going man. Besides, Zatsarenny had that most rare of merits – he spoke fluent Abkhazian, being married to an Abkhazian girl.

The wrestler agreed to accompany us to the Glavny Ridge. He had an excellent knowledge of Abkhazia, and then and there sketched out the most practical and precise itinerary: through the villages of Merkheuly and Tsebelda, along the wild gorge of

Gargemysh to the mountain lake Amtkhel-Azanda at the foot of the majestic Marukh mountain a little to the north-west of the Klukhor pass.

I listened with delight to all these names, foreseeing a wonderful, unhurried tour.

The names of some of the peaks sounded as if we had been transported to South America. One mountain, in particular, struck me with wonder. It was called Agua. Agua – Akonkagua – there was something virginal about it, like forests untouched, as yet, by the axe of man.

I was weak after my illness, but happy. I had the impression of experiencing for the first time an abiding joy coming from the realization of an old dream. I examined my life and invariably came to the conclusion that until then all my thrilling voyages and travels were often confined by the four walls of a room.

Happiness began in the morning appointed for leaving Sukhum. I was woken by a concert of birds.

Perhaps hundreds, but more likely thousands, of birds, in all the glitter of their multi-coloured feathers, stirred the thick foliage of medlars, mimosa and poplars. Like the overwhelming majority of men, I could make nothing of these bustling denizens of the air, of the whirl and confusion of their flight, of the way they chased each other and of the ceaseless quivering of their wings.

At that time I could hardly name a single bird, except the sparrow and the swallow. Not just I, but many people, apart from professional ornithologists, were ignorant about birds. At that time my attitude to this noisy, flying world was entirely superficial.

Encompassed on all sides by nature's vast and mysterious embrace we lived as if blindfolded. We knew only occasional fragments of it.

Approximately from then on I began to accumulate knowledge with ever more dogged determination, but with no discrimination. I was not consistent. I gathered facts according to the degree of their picturesqueness or their usefulness for display in conversation or prose.

Well, now, that morning, the morning of my departure from

Sukhum, I was woken by the chirping of the birds, got up and came up to the window.

The air in the garden was as cold as glass. And on it, as on glass, lay the diaphanous shadows of trees. The morning smell of water filled the whole space round the house. I had the impression that in that smell merged the breath of leaves, of tree-bark, of mountain snow, of streams which fell from the great height of steep and sheer rocks, of mint and of wine.

All this fused into one smell, acrid and exciting. It was the breath of a subtropical morning by the sea.

The noise, the morning, its tang like fresh spray, the high, warbling notes of the birds' songs, the wet, swaying branches, the air generously poured down from the sky, and the smells – all this was happiness no doubt; but slow, calm and certain.

It could not fail me because it existed independently of me.

8

Lake Amtkhel-Azanda

We left Sukhum early, before the dust on the roads had had time to become red-hot. Thick petals of huge crimson roses fell into the dust, dishevelled and untidy like Italian beauties.

Now, almost forty years later, the countryside through which the three of us then walked has, of course, become different and none of us probably would be able to recognize it at once. Possibly, the outline of the mountains is the only thing to have survived from the past, but even of this I am not all that certain.

Changes that take place in nature have the peculiar quality of immediately spreading in all directions, like rings in the water disturbed by a stone.

That is why I want to fix in a moment of time both the countryside and the whole of our hiking trip to the lake as it appeared to us then.

I find it difficult to answer the question why I should be doing all this. The desire to preserve in our memory things that disappear beyond recall is one of the strongest impulses of man. I am obeying it now.

At first, we went along the bank of a mountain stream, called Kelasura. It leapt out of mountain gorges and with something like a sigh of relief spread out in shallow reaches over the shingle. Here and there in the emerald flow it twisted strips of foam into the semblance of ostrich feathers. The current tore the feathers apart, but they reappeared immediately, more luxuriant than ever.

Past the village of Merkheuly, we cut across hot fields of maize.

Not a breath of fesh air could force its way through the rustling maize palisade.

The atmosphere was all the more suffocatingly oppressive for the seeming closeness of the ice-clad peaks of the Caucasian mountains enveloped in a light blue haze, thrusting themselves into the faded sky just above the panicles of maize. There, so beautifully cold in the distance, they could cool the heart of man. And, bathed in sweat, we strove towards them, cursing the drought, cursing the dust and the hot clay beneath our feet.

It was evening by the time we came out of these labyrinthine plantations of sweet corn and hit the road again. On the bank of some roaring and torrential stream we fell down and avidly drank the cold water. It seemed to paralyse the jaws.

The wrestler had taken a glass tumbler with him. To take with one anything made of glass on a hiking trip like ours was somewhat foolish. But he probably had nothing else and had seized the first thing that came to hand.

The wrestler washed out the tumbler in the stream with such zeal that the glass squelched in his fingers and when he scooped up some water we saw that the tumbler, transparent though it was, was grey and dirty compared to the water from the mountains.

I had never before seen such water. It was clearer than air. It partook of the sky's virginal expanse. It was born above us at a vast height where clouds made of icy crystals seemed to stand still while streams gushed out of them.

For a long time that water lay on tops of mountains in the form of crystals. The pressure on the crystals constantly increased. They became more transparent than diamonds. And then, after gradual accumulation had made them into a mass of ice, the crystals flowed down from the mountains in the form of glaciers and on meeting the first crocuses and edelweiss they slowly melted and began their journey into the valleys where the Black Sea heaved and rolled.

How can one describe an edelweiss? It is a difficult task. On the whole, these flowers resemble tiny stars wrapped up to the chin in furs in order not to freeze from contact with ice.

Occasionally I have the desire to meet a man with whom I could

talk without restraint about such things as edelweiss flowers or the smell of cypress cones.

Unfortunately I have never met such men in ordinary life. I have come across them only in books. Probably the gayest and most observant of them was our somewhat sickly friend Heinrich Heine.

Naturally enough, he used irony as a cloak over his romantic apparel, in order to escape the jeers and the sneers of fools who, according to his authoritative opinion, outnumbered humans upon this earth.

So I thought as I lay on the bank of a mountain stream (not, I believe, the Kelasura, but some other river), and surrendered myself to exquisite laziness. My companions and I had not the slightest desire to move on.

We preferred lying on the dry shingle, gazing up into the sky. And the sky seemed to welcome the closer attention that we gave it and started an aerial game, pulling many-coloured veils high above our heads; but the colours were faded and weak – lilac touched with silver, or olive, or pink, or that of a semi-precious stone of which everyone has heard but which few have seen. I believe it is called alexandrite.

We could hardly drag ourselves even as far as the very first house in the village of Tsebelda. The village seemed to plunge and dive among the green and leafy hills.

We spent the night on an old wooden verandah. The slightest movement made it sway and it squeaked like an ungreased cart.

Jackals whined in the maize all night, and when the moon rose towards the morning their lamentations turned to howling, doleful and drawn out.

A watchman came up to our verandah – an old Abkhazian with a long firelock dating back to the days of the conquest of Daghestan. He sat on a log next to the steps for a while, had a smoke and asked me:

'What are people always in such a hurry about? From morn till night? Do you know? I was born lucky, you see. I've been doing my rounds here as a watchman for the past twenty years, my dog and I, and I have never had an argument with anyone. Why argue?

You only get into trouble if you do; people might beat the dog up. And I'm sorry for it, it's blind in one eye. It's called Akhakh.'

I expressed my astonishment at such a strange name for a dog and asked:

'Have you any relations?'

'I haven't. I had a wife; had a daughter, too. Beautiful, both of them. They're gone; gone to Sukhum. Why should they waste their time, sitting here among all this maize? I'm an old man, you know.'

In the light of the moon the watchman showed me the patches on his coat. 'Going up to see Marukh?' he asked with no trace of interest in his voice. 'In a hurry, are you? There are landslides there. Who is it you're looking for, on Marukh?'

'What are you keeping watch over?'

'A lot. Every kitchen garden, every house, every plot of maize. Men are asleep, and I watch over them. I go round a large area of land. There, can you hear? from that noise right up to that one.'

He drew a large semi-circle with his hand. I listened. From far off came the roar of water and it came, too, from the direction opposite, but not so loud, as if it were an echo of the first.

'Waterfalls,' said the watchman and got up. 'They roar all night. God has ordered them to work, and never be silent. He is an angry God, quick-tempered. But why is he angry? We work, we obey him, but he sends down wars on us or a disease on tobacco plants, or else gives us bad children. This is a bad way to behave. He's in too much of a hurry. Unfair, he is.'

The old man stood for a moment, making odd sucking noises with his lips, and then went. His shaggy black dog wandered listlessly after him. It constantly stopped and made a frenzied search for fleas.

I could not fall asleep again.

Now, after many years it gives me great joy to recall that day and to think that I then saw, for the first time in my life, the morning dawn, silent and fragrant like rain, break in mountain fastnesses.

Edged with sun-light, the ice-clad tops of the Bolshoy Range were all aflame. The sunlight fell on the old windows of the house,

kindling them into rainbows of colour, and the glass reflected some strange morning only remotely resembling the one that was starting all around us.

I call it strange because it was reminiscent of those that the artists of the Renaissance painted in their icon-pictures. In those pictures a boy with a slender staff tends lambs which look like small clouds. The distant mountains seem cut out of many-coloured cardboard. The curly trees resemble grapes. Water pours down in bulging cascades from little toy mountains. Isolated flowers stick out of the ground in the most unexpected places. A unicorn stands in a meadow, his golden horn shining like a candle lit at Easter Mass. The Virgin has taken out of her dress one full breast with a dark nipple and is bending the gentle profile of her face over the plump Child.

Strange – exactly such as I am describing it – that morning appeared to me only for an instant because in that instant I fell asleep.

By the time I awoke the wrestler and Samoylin were boiling a kettle over the camp fire.

In Tsebelda Zatsarenny knew a medical assistant, a Greek by origin.

We spent the whole day in his ramshackle house. For some reason, many houses in Tsebelda, let alone the verandah where we had passed the night, rocked and rattled as after an earthquake. From old age, obviously.

The wife of the medical assistant, a big, fat, sleepy Russian woman, gave us *pilaf* and sultanas to eat.

The small house was like a box with secret drawers or like a store room full of funny old junk.

Only in childhood had I seen anything furnished quite like this cramped little house.

A round table, covered by a dark red velvet tablecloth, stood beside a vast carpet-upholstered divan which looked like a battle-ship.

Beetles had eaten their way through an intricate system of paths in that table-cloth. To do so they had chewed the pile right down to the warp.

On closer examination the paths on the table-cloth were somewhat reminiscent of narrow tracks through dusty cornfields.

Plump and gigantic albums rested on the table-cloth. The medical assistant's hobby was to cut the more interesting pictures out of old newspapers and magazines, even out of books sometimes, and paste them in an album.

Most of these were photographs of Royalty, particularly of the disreputable British King Edward VII, of actresses and of admirals. His love of magnificent naval uniforms and of his little old Greek fleet was touching and irradicable. Over the divan hung a lithograph of the famous cruiser the *Averoff*, which Greece bought for a song from either Chile or Peru. But all this did not matter in the least.

Oh, that cruiser *Averoff*! The number of magnificent reproductions of it I saw in Odessa in those days! Terror-inducing smoke always billowed forth out of its funnels, and dozens of Greek white-and-blue flags were always flying all over the ship wherever a flag could be tied.

The *Averoff* – terror of the seas – proudly carried its ramshackle steel armour. Merely to rock on the waves made by its sternpost was a flattering experience for anyone who understood anything about ships.

I have already written several times about the *Averoff*. It is my weakness. I shall never tire of singing the praises of this cruiser as a symbol of a small nation's independence and struggle against the attacks of all predators.

Cartoons of these predators were also pasted in the medical assistant's album. These were the lean Uncle Sam with his goatee and his stars-and-stripes waistcoat, ball-shaped John Bull with the £ sterling sign on his belly, a doleful Abdul-Hamid with a big nose, and an over-ripe courtesan in a Frygian Cap – France.

Some albums had views only, and some only lithographs of family pictures by ponderous German artists such as Kaulbach. I always imagined I could detect a faint odour of nappies wafting up from these pictures.

And then there was an album containing prints of naked beauties – langorous, cow-eyed, sitting, cross-legged on enormous

moon crescents, scattering flowers from a Horn of Plenty, shyly covering their breasts, like Leda confronted by the Swan's burning gaze, bathing, combing their hair, fleeing from goat-footed satyrs, and dancing with tambourines as they writhed their snake-like arms.

Admittedly, this album was lying on a shelf somewhat apart from the others, coyly concealed under a bundle of newspapers.

There was also a great number of plaster plates, with ripe cherries and pears drawn on them, hanging on the walls.

In a book on astronomy – by Jeans, I believe – I had read that in relation to the majestic phenomenon of nature, earth's cover of vegetation, which brings us so much joy, is nothing but a pathetic mould.

And suddenly that small apartment with its dilapidated furniture, its albums and its smell of an anti-bug liquid really struck me as mould compared to the wall of magnificent mountains, rising up to heaven. They stood over the little man, crawling about in the valley, with his flabby, somnolent wife, and his bedraggled, untidy world. A single ray of the sun, its temperature raised no more than ten-fold, could instantly turn this world into sickly smelling ashes.

At dinner, the medical assistant – his name was Yani – made a speech in connection with our hiking trip to the lake Amtkhel-Azanda. He spoke like an old-fashioned orator – with rhetorical questions, pathos and a trembling voice – 'played on heart-strings', as the wrestler put it.

'Oh, Alexander!' cried Yani. 'Laurels bloom in Sukhum! They do not let you sleep. You crave for discoveries! For fame! Why? Are you not satisfied with your beloved family – your dear wife Margaret and your son Pakhom?'

'You'd better show us the way to Amtkhel!' said the wrestler crossly. 'I know all about Margaret, without your help, thank you.'

The medical assistant shook his head sadly.

'There!' he said reproachfully. 'I am urging, personally urging, a man to take a dangerous road! I'm doing so personally.'

'What's so dangerous about it?' asked Samoylin.

'There may be deserters there,' replied the medical assistant,

sounding sinister. 'They've stuck there ever since the war. They live in bands and wander about the mountains.'

The medical assistant turned to the wrestler.

'I have warned you! And now I wash my hands! Do you hear me?'

'Go on, wash them, wash them,' agreed the wrestler good-humouredly. 'Don't try and set up the Moscow Arts Theatre here. Just dress and take us to where the path starts.'

The medical assistant sighed and accompanied us to just outside Tsebelda as far as the beech wood and showed us the path. He said that the path ended after about a kilometre and that after that we should have to rely on notches on trees to guide us on our way.

For the first time in my life I saw a wood composed entirely of beeches. It was a light wood, solemn like a Byzantine cathedral. Or rather, perhaps, it was like an endless colonnade of high tree trunks, covered with greenish suède – a kind of mossy and cool forum along mountain slopes.

We walked on for about two hours, enjoying all that surrounded us – the somewhat pungent odour of the forest undergrowth, the rays of the sun burrowing through the wet foliage of the trees, the mysterious booming sound far away. Perhaps the sound was that of rocks falling from great heights or perhaps it was the echo of avalanches rumbling down the mountains.

The tree notches brought us to the narrow gorge, known as Gargemysh.

Suddenly the wrestler frowned. We walked more slowly. The wrestler ordered us to look carefully to the right and to the left as we went along, at the same time looking out for a place to hide in should we meet with something unpleasant. He did not tell us with whom or what, but we realized that he had the deserters in mind.

But there was nowhere to hide except among piles of branches and fallen trees or behind the thick trunks of beeches. Besides, as Samoylin said, it was useless to try and hide as the highlanders were capable of seeing a fly sitting on a blade of grass three hundred feet away.

The gorge was becoming narrower. We were moving forward warily, looking cautiously to the right and to the left, and this was

why, probably, we never noticed the men coming towards us until they were facing us at a distance of some two hundred paces.

They were treading carefully, like lynxes. Not a branch cracked under their feet. There were four of them. Each one had a sawn-off gun hanging from his shoulder. Only the elderly man, walking in front, held a rifle in his hands.

'Keep calm!' said the wrestler quietly. 'And keep walking as if you were taking a stroll along the quayside.'

The distance separating us was gradually becoming smaller. The deserters were looking at us with a calm, steady gaze. Our faces, as I now realize, must have worn strained and embarrassed smiles. Only the wrestler looked dispassionate, but even he had a slight twitch in his right eye-lid.

The man leading the way stopped, took his rifle and held it in front of his face in outstretched hands. He barred the way. His rifle looked like a barrier lowered at a level crossing.

We stopped. So did the deserters, but none of them came up any nearer, as if keeping at a respectful distance from their elderly leader.

None of us spoke. At last, the elderly man asked in a shrill, bird-like voice, without lowering his rifle:

'What does a Russian want to be here for?'

'We are going to Amtkhel-Azanda,' replied the wrestler. He took out a packet of cigarettes and offered it to the leader.

The leader did not accept it, but merely glanced at it, showing the yellowy whites of his eyes, and asked:

'Why Amtkhel-Azanda?'

'To hunt,' replied the wrestler without losing his composure.

'Oh!' The leader shook his head and made a gurgling noise in his throat. I did not immediately realise that he must have been laughing. 'Why are you trying to deceive me? Why do you tell lies? Where are your guns, hunters?'

'So that's that!' said Doctor Samoylin quietly to me.

We had no weapons. In fact, it was possible to get some kind of poor-quality revolver in Sukhum in those days, but the wrestler maintained that it was safer to go unarmed.

The wrestler smiled and said something to the leader. The

leader looked at the wrestler for a long time through half-closed eyes – then at each one of us as if making up his mind what to do with us, and only then gave his reply to the wrestler.

'He suggests we sit down on this tree trunk that's lying here and have a smoke,' said the wrestler blandly.

We sat down on the tree trunk. Next to each of us sat down one of the highlanders.

I asked the leader where he had learned to speak Russian so well.

'In the war. . . . the Wild Division.'[14]

Next to me sat down a young man with a look of virginal surprise in his eyes, as if he had just been born. Even his mouth was slightly open. Everything drew his attention, down to the laces of my shoes.

The young man examined me, took a packet of cigarettes out of a side pocket of my jacket and transferred it to his own.

Then he started turning my wedding ring round my finger, smacked his lips in admiration and carefully and with a gentle smile took off the ring and put it, too, in his pocket.

He found it difficult to take the ring off with one hand. He, therefore, gave me his gun to hold while he was doing it.

No one spoke. Then the deserters made us get up and slapped us all over with their hard hands, taking a long time about it, probably searching for any weapons that might have been hidden in our clothes. They found nothing and broke into a long discussion, casting cross glances in our direction from time to time.

In the course of the examination they took the wrestler's cigarette lighter and Samoylin's old turnip watch. Our rucksacks packed with food they never touched. One of the men merely gave them a lazy kick just to clear his conscience, obviously. As he did so, he made a scornful remark, and all the highlanders suddenly started shouting at each other so furiously that it looked as if a general slaughter was about to begin.

They seized each other by the arms, they pulled at each other's jackets, they raised the butts of their rifles as if to hit each other, they hissed and suddenly shouted out something violent and obviously intolerably offensive, because each shout was followed by a howl of indignation.

During this quarrel they did not pay the slightest attention to us. In their excitement they brushed against us and pushed us if we weren't there.

The elderly leader sat on a log, smoked, scratched his chest and seemed not to hear this incomprehensible quarrel. Then, lazily, he got up, came up to the young man who had taken my wedding ring, seized his gun and said something sharply and masterfully. The young man flushed crimson, but, all the same, slowly dipped his hand into his pocket, took out the ring and gave it to the leader. The leader also took away the cigarette-lighter and the watch, weighed it all in his hand, shoved it in the inside pocket of his jacket, and said to the wrestler:

'Go where you like, but you won't come back!' The deserters immediately fell silent, and followed their leader as he went, strung out one after the other behind him.

We stood, bewildered.

'What does this mean?' asked Samoylin.

'It means,' replied the wrestler, 'that for the time being they have let us go through to Amtkhel, but will not let us through on our way back. They'll waylay us somewhere here. There is no other road.'

I could not understand anything. If they wanted to rob or even murder us, they had a full opportunity of doing so now.

'Better not to think at all,' advised the wrestler. 'My good luck has baled me out time and again. It'll bale me out now. We'll discuss it all when we reach the lake. But we have to be careful how we go, all the same. Try to walk so that the tree trunks protect your backs from being shot at.'

We went through the gorge, and from a rock in the pond caught sight of Marukh. It shone in the sky like a light blue diamond in a granite foil.

Everything around amazed me with its blend of the grandiose and the infinitely small, both equally beautiful: the far-off ice-covered ridges of Marukh, overhung by the vast cornices of packed snow, and the tiny near-by flowers on the young cornel bushes. These bushes peeped out of crevices in rocks.

Around us swarmed the enormous company of mountain

grasses, mare's-tail, cottony orange flowers, conifer needles as long as knitting needles, and all this, warmed by the sun, gave out a resinous and delicate odour.

The tension after our encounter with the deserters finished us off. We simply fell on the thick moss on the rock which looked like a sacrificial altar in the middle of the wood, and lay for about two hours with no desire to go any further.

Several times in my life I have felt overwhelmed by the thought of nature, peaceful and serene, continuing to exist side by side with human cruelty.

I was first struck by this to the point of fury with human beings, when in Polesye in 1919 I saw a boy, aged about ten, killed by bandits while he was sitting on the grassy bank of the river Uzh, fishing with a home-made walnut rod.

The sun was shining brightly over him, and a warm wind was slowly chasing fluffy clouds across the sky.

The bandits, belonging to some foul gang under the command of an equally foul leader, Struk, happened to notice the boy from the opposite bank and with roars of idiotic laughter picked him as a shooting target and killed him.

The local woodsmen, being afraid of the bandits and therefore speaking as if in their justification, said 'the fellows' were drunk. But the fact that a man when drunk becomes worse than the filthiest beast is no justification.

I shall never forget the hair, made warm by the sun, of the dead, freckly boy – sweet, sun-bleached, childish, and somehow helpless hair. I did not look at the boy's face. But that day of my life I shall remember to my dying day. I have never ventured to tell about it to anyone, even to mother, in order not to make her miserable. Only now, and for the first time, I have spoken about it.

And then, lying in the wood on the way to Amtkhel I mused on the fact that five bandits for no known reason wanted to murder us and might yet do so. This thought filled me with the same disgust and fury as it did that day on the river Uzh. The whole joy and triumph of nature were suddenly dimmed.

I was only restored to a calmer attitude of mind by nature's reminders of itself – some fragrant little petals that had stuck to

my lip, or a tiny, insignificant stream carefully and diffidently trickling through the jungle of grass, afraid of losing its way to the deep hollow in the rock where its water collected into a little blue lake.

It was enough to see all that and examine it with some care for peace to descend (as they were wont to write in the old days) on man's troubled soul.

Limpid water, the colour of turquoise tinged with green, lay below us. On it floated dry, brown maple leaves.

The leaves formed squads and moved in close formation: they turned as in obedience to a word of command, 'all together', and at the slightest puff of wind darted off as if they had cut their anchors, and raced each other to the middle of the lake. There the water glowed like a spirit-lamp.

Moor-hens, with gay little beads for eyes, swam about close to the shore.

To the left of us rose the forest, clinging to the sheer granite walls as mysterious as it appeared from afar. Behind us rustled the earth as it moved down the slopes of precipices. To the right I was afraid so much as to cast a glance – there the sullen, the inscrutable Marukh had stopped in its flight to heaven, still straining upwards with every brazen sinew.

At one place, evidently spurting out of a glacier cave, a wide jet of water arched through the air and fell with a concentrated thud into the lake.

It was the river Azanda. It flowed into the lake from the glaciers in the form of a water-fall and disappeared under the earth in a swift torrent on the rock-strewn beach; it vanished under our very feet, sucking into its whirlpools and dragging down into terrifying subterranean abysses whatever we threw into the water: every twig and every scrap of paper.

The wrestler told us that twelve kilometres to the south the river Azanda broke through to the surface again in a foaming torrent and rushed headlong down to the Black Sea, with its eyes closed against the sudden sun.

Stones moved under the river water and struck each other as if trying out which of them would give out the longest ring.

I was afraid to look too intently at Marukh. Whenever I did I got the impression that the ice at its peak also moved, like the river, and was just about to crash down in a world-shattering waterfall. But from time to time I glanced up at Marukh, all the same. It drew me to itself, and forced me to look at it and make an effort to guess the mysteries hidden in its canyons and in the slight swaying of the grass in the Alpine meadows.

I did not yet know the secrets Marukh could keep from us, but occasionally I could discern pink lichen on the rocks and the slow movement of shadows – they were stealing up to the peak to extinguish its light; I could discern billows of smoke thundering down the slopes of Marukh. Afterwards I realized that it was not smoke, but the dust of landslides.

The whole day Marukh stood opposite us like a green bronze altar of some gigantic and terrible god, the angular shield of an Attic hero – of Heracles or of Atlas. Of course, like Atlas, Marukh could bear on its shoulders the whole terrestrial globe.

In the evening Marukh turned from bronze to a gold nugget, dazzlingly bright and so vast that it must have been visible from the moon.

'Now,' said Zatsarenny to me, 'absorb this peace and stillness, keep silent, observe and think. You'll return to Sukhum a different man. You won't know yourself.'

I looked up at the wrestler with surprise. I never expected such words from him. Previously he had seemed to me a somewhat unsophisticated individual, none too intelligent.

For some reason I am now haunted by the idea that I must put down the whole order of events which happened at that lake, though, in fact, no events took place. However. . . .

However, it all began with us having to go to the lake down the steep slope, clutching on to tree roots and bushes of box.

I then discovered for the first time that the tiny box-tree which resembles our bilberry bush (and has the same kind of small, leathery leaves) easily supports the weight of a grown man.

The lake had a narrow, sandy shore littered with boulders which had rolled down from the mountains.

At one spot the boulders had so fallen that they formed a long

cave opening out directly on to the water. We bivouacked inside it.

The cave had an extraordinarily cosy appearance. Probably because it formed a shelter from landslides, the wind and the rain.

In the cave we could eat more or less in peace. No one disturbed us.

The first day, being inexperienced, we set the food out on a cape which we spread out by the shore. A little moor-hen came at once out of the water, hobbled up to me, gave one quack and snatched a piece of bread out of my hand. I took the bread away from it, but it started fighting and nipped my finger so that it hurt.

Immediately, a few more moor-hens, perfectly unafraid, hobbled up from the shore.

From then on we took great care while eating, and hid the rucksacks with the food under rocks. But the moor-hens gathered about us nevertheless, as soon as we started eating. They crowded round and pushed each other in an attempt to get as near us as possible, stepped on each other's webbed feet and pulled out each other's feathers.

Whenever we caught one of them it raised frantic screams, but only while we were holding it. No sooner did we put it on the ground and let it go than it immediately began climbing on to our knees and snatching away food.

We liked this. 'Probably,' said Zatsarenny thoughtfully, 'only the beasts in Paradise behaved with such lack of inhibition.'

Since we had appeared on the lake the water-hens kept entirely to the side of the shore where we had pitched our camp. They tried not to swim too far out so as not to miss feeding times.

But not all the beasts behaved with quite as much good nature or put quite as much trust in us. We had enemies, too, on the lake – jackals and small mountain bears.

The most impudent and inventive were the jackals.

The very first night they stole our tin kettle and hauled it off into the mountains, but dropped it. The kettle, clanking and rattling, rolled down into the lake.

We woke up in time and saved the kettle. It had a few large dents from hitting against the rocks, but nevertheless, it did not

leak. We duly thanked our lucky stars. Otherwise, we should have perished without tea. Zatsarenny would have suffered most. He could drink tea all day, sitting in the sun with his eyes half-closed in sheer bliss.

'What air!' he would say, sighing noisily. 'Not air so much as balsam!'

The second night the jackals crawled up to us on their bellies and tried to pull the rucksack with food from under Samoylin's head. We had taken the precaution of putting the rucksacks under our heads, but we discovered that even this did not save us from attempts at stealing our things. Then we decided to take turns in watching every night at the camp fire.

The very first night the wrestler dozed off while he was supposed to be watching, and came to as the jackals were straining to pull a parcel of smoked fish from underneath a stone.

Then I invented what seemed to me a marvellous way of dealing with the jackals. I found on the shore a long, dry pole. When it was my turn to watch I sat down next to the fire and put the pole beside me. Zatsarenny and Samoylin fell asleep. I, too, pretended to sleep. I even snored a little occasionally.

That night I saw for the first time in my life how jackals crawl up. Oh, how interesting! – you will say. But, as a witness, I maintain that though some people may find it interesting, mostly it is disgusting and even terrifying.

The jackals were crawling up in the light of the camp fire, like shadows, like moving phantoms, moulting and moth-eaten.

Carefully, I put one end of the pole into the fire. The jackals stood stock-still for a moment, then started crawling up again.

The leader was crawling in front. By now I could see him distinctly in the glow of the camp fire. His ears were pressed close to his head, and he was baring his uneven teeth, just in case.

I waited for the leader to crawl up to a spot within the pole's length of the fire (there was a sausage lying next to it by way of bait), then rapidly took the flaming pole out of the fire and laid it across the leader's back.

The first thing the leader did was to let out a yelp. In his angry yelp I even thought I heard the human words: 'Oh, hell!' Then he

jumped, backwards, not forwards and rushed headlong into the mountains taking the whole pack with him. There was a smell of singed fur. The obvious conclusion was that I had singed the jackal's hide.

Zatsarenny and Samoylin woke up. They praised my ingenuity. They even flattered me, I think. I was ready to plume myself on my discovery. But had I known what dire consequences would fall on our heads after my reprisals against the jackals I would not have made such rash experiments.

The jackals climbed on to the neighbouring rocks and howled in unison and with such frenzy and despair that there was no question of sleep while the howling lasted. They took their revenge on us and howled for forty-eight hours on end.

The bears turned out to be more noxious than the jackals. They contrived a clever way of driving us away from the lake. From then on we felt ourselves in some way besieged and if we came out alive it was only thanks to constant vigilance.

From early morning the bears would take up their positions, lying down at the edge of a rock jutting out over us and watched us, with just their heads sticking out.

Whenever one of us forgot about the danger and walked along the shore past the bears above, they would set a stone rolling in his direction and cause a landslide. Dust would fly, large boulders would thunder down, skipping on their way, small stones shot off in all directions and whistled as they plunged into the water. Samoylin very nearly met his death under one such landslide.

We tried to chase the bears away, but we were unarmed. Whistling and swearing had no effect on them.

This was most annoying. We could not walk freely along the shore, but had to keep within the shelter of the cave.

Sometimes Zatsarenny would lose his temper, swear at the bears in his mighty bass and shake his fist at them. This would amuse the bears, and in their curiosity they would stretch out their necks; then they would let down another landslide.

But in the end fate avenged us. A small bear stretched his head too far out over the precipice, lost his grip, rushed past us in a black, shaggy ball, crashed down into the water with a mighty

splatter, gave a short roar, dived in and disappeared for ever. He was obviously drowned, the poor wretch.

The bears stayed on their rock till the evening, then left and never came back. Their friend's disappearance had frightened them. They obviously put it down to human machinations.

Large, flat, ivory-coloured stones lay in the blue water beside the shore.

On one spot these stones were so numerous that by jumping from one to another I could get almost to the middle of the lake in order to do some fishing. At the last stones the water was very deep.

Once, I slipped and fell off a stone and felt the unbearable, scorching cold of glacier water. I immediately had a cramp in one foot, as if someone had started quickly winding a tight and creaky tendon on to a spoke. I had the impression the tendon was going to break at any moment.

But sitting on the stones it was hot, in spite of the cosmically cold water – there was never any wind on the lake. The crystal clarity of reflections in the water was so perfect that it was impossible to distinguish the reflection of the shores and mountains from the real shores and mountains.

It was as if there were two Caucasuses around us. One of them rose up to the sky above, and the other went down into the shining abyss beneath our feet. Identical feathery clouds slowly moved in the sky and along the bottom of the abyss.

Every time I threw my line and sinker into the lake I shattered the ideal fusion of this world.

From time to time a speckled trout would bite – strong and tense like a tendon. Or else a grey mullet would rush off with the line, taking it out straight as a die and then swish its tail and break the line like cobweb.

It was an amazing occupation – catching fish in liquid sapphire and avidly feasting one's eyes on all that was around one, from the pattern of cracks on a stone to the float made of dry maple leaves tied in a bunch. Whenever a fish bit the leaves folded like a fan and slowly sank in the water.

I used to fish till evening. Sunset would find me sitting on my stones. Once I let out a cry out of sheer surprise when, on raising my eyes from the float, I suddenly saw the sun's reflection on the glaciers which looked as if they had been steeped in blood.

I did not mean to cry out and was annoyed at myself for my lack of restraint. But the sweep of the burning sky was too vast, too mysterious the smoke of the clouds, too sharp the glitter of the ice on the peak of Marukh.

All in all I have been fortunate in life. Almost every day I have learned or seen something new. And the more one knows, the more interesting and, strange as it may seem, the more mysterious life becomes.

During these sunsets at the foot of the Glavny range I saw one of the most majestic sights on earth – a spate of so much resplendence of colour that one had the impression that at that altitude our eyes acquired an additional property: that of seeing many more colours than they can see in the depth of valleys, in the steppes and on the sea-shore.

Nevertheless, I waited unregretfully for the sunset's glow to die. Because I knew that the twilight, faintly translucent with the distant glitter of the sea, was no less fascinating than mountain sunsets.

And then there was peace and the fading out of that opalescence which seemed to surround us. Silence came and sat beside the camp fire and gazed long at the last embers dusted over with a lilac ash. There were many falling stars.

On the sixth day our food supply ran out and we left lake Amtkhel-Azanda.

The wrestler was convinced that around Tsebelda we should meet the deserters again and that this time we should not get off so lightly. We therefore decided to go to Sukhum directly across the mountains, avoiding the Gargemysh pass.

We had no map, but the wrestler undertook to lead us to the spot where the river Azanda, after flowing for twelve kilometres underground, again emerged on the surface. After that we had to keep alongside the river until we reached Merkheuly.

It took us the whole day to cover these twelve kilometres. We

returned to Sukhum dusty, hungry, sore-footed and scorched by the sun, but happy.

In Sukhum it was sultry and I felt sleepy and lonely.

During my absence, Mademoiselle Jaloux had let the empty room next to mine to a little man with colourless hair, an accountant from the Trading Delegation by the name of Kotnikov.

Everything about this rational little man was, so to speak, the reverse of Sukhum, beginning with the fact that he had a freckled face, continually blinked his reddish little albino eyes with white eye-lashes, and liked singing a song which began: 'Oh, the man I'd like to marry, he should wear a plain white dicky.' He sang in a high, reedy tenor.

In his free time he drank tea in the garden under the banana tree. A towel, embroidered with the traditional cockrels, hung round his neck. He constantly used it to wipe his sweaty, red face, cleared his throat and began again: 'He should wear a dicky white and plain, in his hand a walking cane.'

Kotnikov behaved in the Caucasus as if it was not Sukhum, but a small Russian provincial town. Nothing interested him – neither the sea, nor the tropical vegetation, nor the mountains, nor the Abkhazians, nor their character or customs. He liked talking about the town of Mologa where he was born. Almost all his stories he started with one and the same phrase: 'Well now in our little town, Mologa, my respected mamma, Apollinaria Frolovna, had a hell of a habit. . . .'

With the appearance of Kotnikov life immediately became boring. Time seemed to stop. It stood still like a broken watch, to the tiresome humming of the accountant: 'Mary went into the wood, for to find a husband good.'

Later, Kotnikov's wife arived from Western Russia – exactly, the same as he, small, snub-nosed, covered with pink freckles. She came into the house and before she had even taken her coat off she asked her husband:

'How much do they sell eggs for here?'

It was unfair, of course, but I took an instant dislike to Kotnikov and his wife. And I realized that it was completely pointless

for me to continue living in Sukhum and that I had nothing more to do there.

I decided to go to Batum. Lucienna, the typist from *The Seaman*, was now living there. In Odessa she had married an artist, Sinyavsky, and had fled from hungry Odessa to Batum. She wrote to me that Batum had been declared a 'free port' and the city was packed with 'lovely goods' – saccharine, *bubliks*,[15] ladies' garters and shoe laces. 'If the worst comes to the worst – wrote Lucienna – we can always munch laces.'

Apart from Lucienna, Babel, too, was living in Batum – Cape Zeleny district – together with his wife Evgenia and his sister Mary.

And here I was, slaving away, all by myself in Sukhum, editing journalists' reports for a small, boring newspaper.

I became incensed at myself, took the boat, the *Ilyich*, without paying for a ticket and went off to Batum.

The evening was drawing in. A veil of mist was falling on the shores of Abkhazia. I lay on the stern deck, beside the flagstaff, with an overcoat under my head and a small cushion stuffed with Sukhumi tobacco (the export of tobacco from Abkhazia was forbidden).

Suddenly, a happy smell of magnolias and mimosas – a smell full of longing, redolent of wanderings and of Asia Minor and of impenetrable vegetation and of warm, pitch-dark nights – wafted in from the shore on a current of air and broke into the acrid smell of my tobacco. I felt a pang in my heart. Yet another corner of the earth, where I was leaving a part of my thoughts and of my time, was slipping away from me – probably for ever.

A few years later I found myself again in that town, for a short while, and failed to recognize it. It had become a crowded, pompous and rather foppish health resort. Its streets smelt not of magnolias, but of exhaust fumes and women's singed hair.

And now I was lying on the deck, thinking that the patriarchal simplicity of Sukhum was finished for ever.

Perhaps the last and most moving episode of that life was the reception of Michael Kalinin.

Kalinin was sailing past Sukhum and went on shore for a

few hours. The whole town gathered on the quay-side – a picturesque throng of hoods, cherkeskas, long grey moustaches, wide sleeves with gaily-coloured lining, daggers and riding breeches with gold seams.

When Kalinin's launch was nearing the shore, the somewhat simple-minded chief of the Sukhumi police galloped along the quay-side on his fiery steed and shouted to the crowd:

'Handsome men, forward!'

Currents, rapid and precipitous, seemed to run through the crowd, but not a cry, not an oath was heard.

And, in fact, a kind of miracle took place under our very eyes: of its own accord the crowd seemed to have selected and thrust forward all its good looking men and women – youths with fine curved noses like an eagle's beak, silver-haired patriarchs and girls with guttural voices and cheeks ablaze with embarrassment.

The police chief galloped past the crowd for the second time and shouted, 'My hearty thanks!' – and his steed, dancing and skipping and pricking up his ears, in fact showing off with all the grace in the world, pranced away in the direction of the landing pier where, with the noise of a landslide, down crashed the thunder of a so-called *sazandari*[16] band consisting of pipes and drums, the most vigorously doleful band in the world, and with more staying power than any other.

9
In the Flat Port

I woke up in the middle of the night. The *Ilyich* was moored in a port which seemed to be flush with the sea. I had the impression that the port lights were floating on the water like saucers.

I forgot that on her way to Batum the *Ilyich* had to call at Poti, the port between Batum and Sukhum.

There were no signs of a town anywhere. Afterwards I discovered that Poti was a long way away from the port.

From the sky dropped rare drops of rain – warm like tepid tea. The smell of orange blossom wafted in occasionally from somewhere.

Suddenly, without any tangible reason, I was overwhelmed with a sense of depression, so sharp and unexpected that I did not know what to do.

I knew, of course, the cause of that depression, but did not admit it to myself because there was nothing I could do about it.

It was an old, deep-rooted depression. It was due to a feeling of loneliness which had been with me for a long time, and which was all the more difficult to understand because I had a sociable nature, liked gaiety and was not in the least prone to gloomy self-analysis. I wanted to grab life in armfuls, like people pluck lilac in the spring, I wanted every day to be different from the one that had preceded it, I wanted an unending variety of the most extraordinary men, countries and events that existed in this world.

But through no fault of my own (the fault, of course, was mine, but I did not realize it), my life was running along a groove in which variety and events and travels and a host of interesting

people were there in abundance, but one thing alone was missing: the presence of warm, affectionate people of my own family, who would love me and be loved in return.

There were mother and Galya, but I had been cast so far away from them and our letters to each other were so rare and so short that it was as if we were trying with great difficulty to shout to each other across a wide and noisy river and could hardly discern each other, standing on the mossy banks.

Not a day passed without this separation and lack of contact making my heart ache and without my groaning aloud at the pity of it and the feeling of anger with myself.

I could not get the better of my greed. 'What am I storing it all up for?' I kept asking myself, but never answered this question, for I stored up life's experiences quite instinctively in obedience to some inner compulsion which remained unintelligible even to myself.

The answer only came in later years when I began writing.

Greed made me constantly seek new places, people, knowledge, impressions, activity, and made me move away, without my quite realizing it, further and further away from my recent past.

Recent it was, and yet at the same time I somehow felt it to be very distant. For example I had the impression that whole years had stretched between this night in the silent port of Poti and, say, the evening in the half-ruined house at Fontany with Bagritsky reading the poetry of Blok. I felt time as if it were a weight. It dragged me down, physically.

This sensation of loneliness I experienced with exceptional sharpness in Sukhum. Perhaps because there I found myself outside the set of people to which I had become used in the course of the past few years – the set consisting of journalists and writers. I found myself no longer experiencing the feeling I had latterly had in Odessa. It could be called the feeling of early spring in life, the feeling of being brushed almost imperceptibly, uncertainly as yet, and for the first time, by new art and new literature. Perhaps this comparison is a little ornate or perhaps tasteless, but this is precisely how I felt.

Tempestuous spring was in the air. Projects were born,

strength was renewed, experience was growing and some great and wise word, like the sun's disk rising from behind a mountain ridge, was just about to burst upon the world.

Thus I thought then and was happy because of it. The feeling chased away depression. It was not alone to do so; there were many other things – utter trifles even – that also drove away depression, for example this slow, rainy night on the empty deck of a ship in a port to which I had never intended to come.

'Man cannot be alone,' I reflected. 'He just can't. He'd perish if he were.'

The ship put out. Beyond the jetty waves frothed and foamed – discreetly as yet. A tall lighthouse, indifferent to all around it, cast an unnaturally white light on the disturbed waters.

A seaman came up, leading a small white dog on a string, all shaggy and miserable, tied it to a bench not far from where I was, and went away.

The dog shivered so much that its claws tapped against the deck.

I untied it and it lay down at my feet. At first it whimpered quietly, then sighed and licked my hand.

'Even a dog can't be alone, not just a man,' I thought. 'It can't.'

I fell asleep. Through my sleep I heard the thrumming of the ship's log as it registered the miles.

10

The Sounds and Smells of Batum

There were many dukhans and coffee houses in Batum.

The glass in the doors of all dukhans and coffee houses was loosely set and it rattled and clanked for a long time at every push of the door.

The constant ringing sound of the doors merged with that of copper sheets. Lean coppersmiths with deep-set eyes made small Turkish coffee pots out of these sheets and riveted long handles to them – likewise made of copper.

And here, too, on new carpets laid out in the middle of the narrow little streets, cheeky gipsy girls danced and screamed out songs and beat their old tambourines, with little bells attached.

There was one unfailing sign by which people were recognized as newcomers to Batum: they carefully went round the carpets to avoid making them dirty. But soon they discovered that the carpets were purposely rolled out so as to occupy the whole width of a street, and thus destroy the bloom of newness and of the loud, as yet unfaded, colours. They then took to trampling the carpets with the delight of native Batumis.

Horses irritated by the hubbub of the bazaar, kicked and gave out – they, too – a ringing sound for they had garlands of little bells hung round their necks.

But Batum did not consist entirely of ringing sounds. It consisted of a multitude of things, for instance, of the smoke of roasting kebbab. . . . However, before we deal with these things, let us finish with what we have to say about sounds.

And so, in Batum, particularly in the Turkish bazaar, known as

Nuri, you were deafened with a whole kaleidoscope of sounds – from the bleating of sheep to the desperate cries of maize sellers: 'Hot maize!'; from the plaintive moans of a muezzin on the top of a near-by mosque to the squeaking of pipes out of the windows of dukhans and the tearful singing of their tipsy patrons.

But quite particularly lovely in Batum were the sound of rain and the hooting of ships.

Batum's winter rains sang in parts rather than unison. The harder it rained the higher was the note which rang in the drain pipes. The ships' hooters, on the other hand, sang in unison and had baritone voices, particularly foreign tankers with yellow funnels and masts. I arrived in Batum during the season of autumn and winter rains. The rains fell almost uninterruptedly, dimming the light of day, and plunging the days themselves into a warm, indeed almost a hot, dusk. Gaps of light were rare.

It was years before I visited Batum again (by then it was called Batumi), but this time in the early summer, and first saw all the brilliance and the splendour of Batumi vegetation and the purest blue of its sky.

Ships crawled, uttering little cries, into the picturesque slums of the oil harbour, berthed hard against the dukhans, the warehouses and the shacks, their rigging hanging over the noisy and crowded quayside. It was as if a herd of huge, iron whales had been washed ashore.

The yellowness of the funnels and masts combined in my imagination with the sands of the Arabian or Somali deserts and with the Red Sea, through which these ships must inevitably have sailed.

Sometimes 'the foreigners' approached the Batumi port flying a yellow flag at yard-arm. This meant that on her way to Batum the ship had entered sea ports where epidemics of cholera or smallpox, the plague or dysentery had never abated. These ships were towed away, berthed in the roadsteads for quarantine purposes and their holds sulphurated.

As to smells, the rancid smoke of roasting mutton nearly always dominated them all. And that was a great pity because other Batumi smells were much more pleasant. But they could rarely win through.

That smoke, acrid and coarse, and rasping to the throat, had the one and only merit of reminding one of Batumi kebbabs, probably the best in the Caucasus.

They were threaded on steel spits and roasted on charcoal, then sprinkled with cinnamon or berberis powder – so bitter to the taste – covered with spring onions and eaten with fresh *lavash*,[17] washed down with white wine. I don't think I have ever in my life eaten anything better.

Next came the smell of freshly ground or freshly brewed coffee. It was ground in Turkish coffee-mills, made of copper and looking like small shell-cases. On the outside they were engraved with a design. It sometimes represented scenes from the Arabian Nights.

These coffee-mills reduced the coffee beans to finest powder.

The smell of coffee made me think simultaneously of East and West. Both eastern and western countries equally smelled of coffee.

As to old Europe it was simply inseparable, in my imagination, from hot coffee steam and smells that often accompanied the smell of coffee – ships' smoke, crisp morning bread, fennel, overblown roses and tobacco.

In the mornings, when still half-asleep, I often saw Europe in my mind's eye as a distant shore. Just visible over the low bank of pink and foaming waves glittered the ancient windows of its cities.

The waves rose and then fell rumbling on the sand. Water settled, as fine as dust, on the leaves of plane trees, and in the cool gardens a seemingly familiar and yet unfamiliar city opened itself before me. And I tried to guess what city it might be: Ancona or Civitavecchia, Bordeaux or Rotterdam.

For me, who had never before been to Russia's southern confines, Batum was an extraordinary, exotic, typically eastern city.

Batum was permeated with the smell of coffee, wine and tangerines. And it took me two to three months before I began losing the intoxicating sense of the exotic, its bitter cloying taste, and saw behind it the city's real life. There was never a lull in its far from provincial life, and the port drew to itself, like a huge condenser, the entire working population of Batum.

At that time Batum was visited by a great number of feluccas

with oranges and tangerines from near-by Turkey – from Rizeh and Trapezund (in Batum they said Trebizond). These aromatic fruit were stacked in pyramids on the decks of feluccas which were as multi-coloured as Easter eggs.

I often saw one and the same scene: old Turks, reclining on mat-covered oranges, drinking thick, aromatic coffee and smacking their lips.

The smell of coffee spread not only from feluccas, but also from the shingle on the beach. It was edged with coffee-grounds. Torn yellow shreds of tangerine peel were strewn conspicuously among them.

In the evening the sailors on the feluccas prayed sitting on their heaps of oranges, turned to the south-east, in the direction of Mecca, occasionally lifting up their hands or pressing their foreheads against the cold oranges.

There where Mecca lay, shimmered a mauve dusk as yet unpierced by the stars. The sailors believed that beyond that dusk flowed a river of paradise with water as blue as the sky – 'the river of rivers', Kovser.

I should also have liked to believe this, but my reason could no longer go back to the age of childhood.

At that time I had the absurd conviction that every new thought or grain of knowledge acquired by me was a contribution to the total sum of culture.

Oh yes, indeed, Batum and the Batumi port smelled of tangerines, oil and seaweed.

Sea-weed, like a dark-green, almost black mane of hair, hung in abundance on the port piles. In spite of being continually rinsed by the wave of the sea the sea-weed did not become any lighter in colour and never lost its pharmaceutical smell.

In the town itself, further away from the port, and especially along the Primorsky Boulevard, which was somewhat akin to the avenues in Singapore and Bombay, there was a constant, cloying smell of magnolia, and beyond the town, along the road to Bartskhana, a suburb of Batum where the Sinyavskys lived, it smelled of sweet briar because of the dusty and prickly hedges.

II

'That's not Mother'

Lucienna and Misha Sinyavsky met me at the landing stage in Batum. Then Babel came running up, panting with the effort. He lived outside the town in Cape Zeleny, and travelled to Batum by the local train.

The Sinyavskys rented a flat which consisted of the glass-protected verandah of a house in Bartskhana. I became their lodger.

So began our life in common – a very carefree life, even if life on a shoe-string. Neither the Sinyavskys nor I had any money, and I did not even have 'a definite job'. All I had was bold plans.

I hoped to be able to start a newspaper in Batum – something like the *Moryak* (*The Seaman*).

I simply missed my *Moryak*. I had by then become absorbed by newspaper work, with its frantic rush and hurry and its close touch with the life – always seething, with never a lull – of the people, the whole country, the whole of Europe, the whole world.

The new ideas, which had invaded our consciousness after the revolution made all of us, even in our own estimation, into representatives of the progressive generation. My hope to start 'my own' – as I expressed it then – newspaper in Batum was due to the fact that the Black Sea coast from Gagry to Batum was in the hands of the Seamen's Union of Georgia. The seamen, of course, longed to have their own newspaper. But in the meanwhile things got nowhere beyond talks which I had on the subject with Nirk, an Estonian and Commissar of the Seamen's Union.

On the morning of my arrival Misha Sinyavsky took a bottle of

vodka out of a little plywood cupboard. The white label bore a representation of a good-natured cow and a statement to the effect that the vodka was made in Artemi Rukhadze's Batumi distillery. Lucienna fried a plaice. We ate the plaice served up with tangerines, washed it down with Rukhadze's vodka and felt happy.

Everything around us contributed to our happy frame of mind – most of all the knowledge that we were in a sub-tropical area where the rain was warm and where the sky was covered with such dense clouds (it was October by then) that dusk reigned all day long over the face of the earth. Somewhere within that dusk, slowly and solemnly, the Black Sea rolled its waves, reaching almost to the threshold of our verandah.

Carts loaded with the dark-mauve 'Isabella' grapes went past our house. The grapes, as I then thought, tasted of Spain.

The river Bartskhana, which flowed on the other side of our fence, its water curling along the stones, carried out into the sea the yellow and purple leaves of the grapes. The earth smelled of home-made wine.

After meals we drank coffee, smoked Sukhumi tobacco and talked of Odessa, and life was never more beautiful. Especially because of the smell of the breakers which rumbled in the silent rain.

Misha Sinyavsky, a tall, somewhat morose man, given to making mocking remarks and acute, if humorous, observations, thought of a good occupation. He hung out a poster on the wall of his verandah, saying that he made enlargements from photographs, and made them in colour, too.

To his surprise, customers appeared not only from Bartskhana, but even from Makindzhaura and Batum itself!

The customers had the simplicity of children. They regarded Misha's work as an incomprehensible marvel, God's own gift. Whenever the finished portrait was handed to them they held it with great care, clicked their tongues in admiration, nodded their heads, and meekly paid one Turkish lira (Soviet money was still scarce in Batum in those days, and Georgian Treasury bills no longer had any value).

One lira lasted us three days. But very soon a seaman's news-

paper *Mayak* (*The Lighthouse*) really was started in Batum, I, too, began earning money, and life on our ramshackle verandah acquired certain signs of affluence. It was measured by the amount of tangerines, cigarettes and tins of coffee essence.

Once, an elderly Greek by the name of Yani, a cobbler from the Nuri bazaar, ordered a portrait to be made by Misha from the photograph of his (Yani's) mother. And in colour, too.

I examined the photograph and discovered that Yani's mother had it taken in Greece, in the town of Volo, in 1880 and had been an astounding beauty. She resembled the proud girl in a Phrygian cap summoning men to the barricades in Delacroix's picture: 'Liberty leading the people'.

I was amused by the many prize medals received by the photographer Metaxos (of Volo) and reproduced on the back of the photograph.

I could somehow see that short, affected, spotty little Greek wearing high heels and a butterfly tie. He had, of course, impeccable tact and manners, quite up to the Paris standard, and photographed his clients in lemon-coloured kid gloves (also up to the Paris standard) in order to stun their provincial minds and force them to loosen their purse-strings.

While he worked Misha liked inventing all sorts of absurd stories about his clients – their biographies, mostly.

Lucienna stood outside, making caviare out of *satsivi* (we now had enough money even for satsivi occasionally), fumbled with the buttons of her short cardigan which was splitting at the seams and added a few naturalistic details to Misha's verbal portraits.

'But you've forgotten to say,' she would yell, 'that that Metaxos of yours, the beautiful man, used to wear pink underpants, the colour of a blushing bride! They had twice his waist measurements and he fastened them with a rusty safety pin!'

One day Babel caught us at it. He immediately joined in the game and told us with a wealth of detail what a fool Metaxos was.

We ate the satsivi and drank a bottle of vodka, after which the wooden and shaky verandah seemed to me the finest place for talk, laughter and deep sea-side sleep.

We were all then filled with faith in the future and were more aware of the newness of our own epoch.

Even the rain, pelting down the wall with all its might and main, seemed to take part in our conversations.

And whenever I drank a little more than I should have, I got the impression that the rain was eavesdropping as we talked, and was typing out on an old typewriter all we were saying, so that one day an interesting book would result from the notes it was making.

Talk did not prevent Sinyavsky from working. 'Mother's' portrait was such a success that it really was difficult to tear oneself away from it. Particularly good were the golden eyes and the slightly parted lips. It looked as if the Greek girl's breast was quietly heaving and her fragrant breath was flitting out of her mouth.

'For a portrait like this,' said Babel, 'you would be fully justified in taking as much as four liras. Now then, Misha, don't miss your chance.'

In the morning Misha took the portrait to his client. I went with him. We made up our minds to ask the cobbler for three liras. Then decided on two.

The elderly cobbler Yani lived at the back of an ancient courtyard which somewhat resembled a piece of stage scenery. Greek children rushed about, yelling excitedly. Stout Greek women, with their mighty breasts on window-sills, looked at us out of their windows and tittered as they discussed our personal appearance.

The cobbler Yani was sitting in the yard at the door of his hovel. His mouth was full of wooden nails. He spat them out and said to us '*Kala mera*'.[18]

Misha took out the portrait with no undue haste, and without letting it out of his hands turned it to face the cobbler.

What happened next was a stupendous miracle, such as can be produced only by great art, only by painting equal in greatness and effect to the creations of humanity's best masters, such as Botticelli, Raphael or Vermeer van Delft: Yani glanced at the portrait and burst into tears.

Behind our backs we heard the excited cries of the Greek women leaning on their window-sills.

My admiration of Misha's art in no way yielded to the cobbler's, but nevertheless I did not abandon my common sense, nudged Misha and said quietly:

'Take three liras.'

We waited for Yani to calm down. But he went on for a long time blowing his nose on his apron, sobbing and drying his eyes with a sleeve.

Behind him stood a small woman, dark as an over-roasted crust of rye bread, and gazed dully on mother's portrait. It was Yani's wife. She alone expressed no delight.

At last Misha screwed up his courage and mindful of Yani's filial feelings gently reminded him that we were waiting and that he owed us three liras.

Thereupon Yani began to sway like a Moslem performing the rite of namaz or a giaour suffering from toothache, clutched his head with both hands, groaned and said in a mournful yet angry voice:

'This isn't mother! This isn't mother at all! And you won't get a thing, because you've deceived a poor man.'

We were dumbfounded. The whole courtyard was filled with ringing silence. The courtyard was waiting for further developments.

'How do you mean, it isn't mother?' asked Misha, completely stunned.

'It's not mother!' cried Yani and struck his stool with his last. Wooden nails flew in all directions. 'Mother was old, grey haired. I remember her well. She died when I was seven and my eldest brother was already fifty. And what have you done? You've drawn some little harp player from the "Miramare" restaurant, that's what you've done. Horrible! Take your portrait and go. And you want three liras for it, too! You'll have me cock a snook at you three times, you shark, rather than give you three liras!'

Yani cocked a snook at Misha three times. No one could stand for this or let the culprit go with impunity.

Misha turned purple, seized Yani by the collar, forced him to

get up and said quietly, but so that everyone could hear him in the whole yard.

'So what then? You gave me mother's photo when she was sixteen and want me to make a hundred-year-old woman out of her for you! Pay now or I'll shake the guts out of you!'

'It's not mother!' cried Yani again in a piercing yell and started twisting and wriggling in Misha's hands in an attempt to wrench himself free.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation and the threat of remaining without bread for a time, I leaned against the trunk of a dry mulberry tree in the yard and roared with laughter.

Then Misha let go the cobbler, turned to the windows, from which the lodgers were hanging out in clusters and cried:

'Citizen Greeks! Descendants of great men! Why do you allow this shame to happen!'

There was an immediate storm. Dozens of voices cried out of all the windows and doors:

'What are you talking about, Yani? It certainly is mother. The speaking likeness of mother! Pay this man at once! Do you hear?'

Several men in waistcoats and shirtsleeves rushed out into the yard. They shook Yani by the shoulders and shouted:

'You're bringing shame on all of us, Yani! Have a conscience! It couldn't be more like mother! We shall all enjoy looking at her every day. Such a beautiful Greek woman! Beautiful! Pay the money and keep quiet. Pay it, go on!'

'Three liras?' asked the bewildered Yani hoarsely. 'I won't.'

'All right!' screamed the Greeks. 'Two liras. Two! And let the young men go.'

Yani flung two liras on the table. Misha took them and we went, to the strain of advice and farewells shouted at us in chorus by all the lodgers.

Half an hour later we discovered that one lira was forged.

In fact, counterfeit liras in Batum outnumbered the genuine kind. Hence, it became customary in Batum to write one's name on lira notes when paying for anything, so that a man trying to palm off a spurious note could be found later.

All the notes, however, had by then such a profusion of names

written on them that frequently there was not a clear space left. Sometimes, it was not even possible to discover the value of the money. Especially if among all the numerous autographs there happened to be one written in indelible pencil, which had run and spread as a result of rain or the owner's sweat.

But we were beyond asking the cobbler for his signature and left, giving up the struggle.

At home we called a meeting, with Lucienna taking part. Misha said he'd be damned four times over if he ever again enlarged another photograph. All his life he had dreamt of becoming an architectural artist, like Piranesi, in order to evolve the same style and perfect it, and not of making portraits of long-nosed eastern cobblers and their mums.

Lucienna said that Misha was a wonderful chap, but how were they going to go on living?

All of a sudden I had a happy thought. It was suggested to me by a visit to a dukhan called 'Babulya poretseski.'

This name, clumsily written in differently coloured pencils, was mysterious and required linguistic research (or 'excavations', as Misha put it), in order to establish its origin.

We were helped to decipher the sign-board by the Batumi poet Chachikov, a refined, if somewhat shabby, knight errant and ex-ensign. He had become acquainted with Lucienna in the bazaar and had pretended to pay court to her ever since pressing both hands to his heart. From his hands hung a heavy rosary of black amber.

Chachikov wrote futurist poems about his cavalry past. I remember some of them. One day he read them out to us in Bartskhana, sitting astride a chair and hitting his patent-leather leggings with a riding crop:

What care I for Apollo and all his Muses!
I am an Apollo in riding breeches myself.

All in all, however, he was a kind and brave fellow for all his boasting. He liked talking about his childhood spent, so he said, in Persia, in the town of Mossul. On such occasions he would exclaim:

Praise be to thee, oh muslin Mossul,
The refuge of my ancestors long dead!

Chachikov had no difficulty in decoding the name of the dukhan.

'*Babulya*,' he said 'is the local name of the fish *barabuli*, or red mullet. No other fish in the Black Sea tastes quite as well. *Poretseski* stands for *Po-grecheski*.[19] And so you can guess for yourselves that the name should be translated: "Red mullet à la grecque". The above-mentioned dukhan is famous for that particular dish.'

One day, as I sat in that dukhan, I noticed a picture of Kemal-Pasha cut out of a newspaper, hanging on the wall over my table. A child's uncertain hand had drawn a wreath of wild poppies round Kemal.

Misha, I thought, had to change over to making portraits of Kemal-Pasha. Firstly, there were quite a lot of Turks in Batum at the time. Secondly, there were no portraits or photographs at all of Kemal in the town. Thirdly, it was no use sweating over faded old photographs and dealing with quarrelsome relatives.

Batumi Turks regarded Kemal as their national hero, but the town was hardly likely to have a single man who had seen Kemal with his own eyes.

Misha agreed. He began by drawing Kemal in profile and presenting the portrait as a gift to the owner of the dukhan 'Babulya poretseski'.

The success of the enterprise with Kemal's portraits surpassed, as they say, all expectations. Orders rained from all sides. Lucienna worked out a scale of prices: for a portrait in Indian ink, in profile – one lira; full face – two liras; for a portrait in colour – three liras; for a portrait representing Kemal on a black steed – four liras, and finally for a portrait in which Kemal galloped on a field of battle prancing on the corpses of his enemies – five liras.

The Greco-Turkish war, which slightly involved Batum as well, was being waged just then. But more of this later. Misha acquired such skill in drawing Kemal that he could do it with his eyes shut. Affluence again returned to our verandah in Bartskhana.

But by then I began editing the seamen's newspaper *Mayak* and moved into town. I was given a room in 'The Boarding House' – a hotel for sailors left behind by their ships.

12

A Coastal Shelter

Almost all ports in the world have so-called 'coastal shelters' for sailors left behind by their ships. These shelters are also known as Boarding Houses. They are a cross between a doss house, a pub, a police cell for drunks and a brothel.

Such a Boarding House existed in Batum too, but in modified form – without obvious signs of being either a pub or a brothel.

When, under the strong pressure of Commissar Nirk (with Nirk himself being subjected to pressure by me), the Seamen's Union of Gagry-Batum at last decided to publish its own newspaper, *The Mayak*, I, as the editor, was given a room in the Boarding House. I was warned, however that the room would also be the editorial office. This suited me perfectly.

The old two-storey building of the Boarding House, with its frontage covered with corrugated iron – a protection against the heavy Batumi rains – was red with rust. The house stood on the quay, close to the sea. During the heavy winter storms the seaspray, brought by the wind, drummed on the windows producing the effect of pouring rain.

Apart from me, the first floor of the Boarding House was inhabited by Nirk, handsome, fair-haired and fond of sport, and by his wife – a timid, florid Estonian girl.

The other rooms were occupied by stranded sailors, mainly Greeks and Americans.

As all the sailors were left behind by their ships for one reason only – because they got drunk – lodgers in the Boarding House

presented very little variety: they were hopeless sots who shouted and tried to pick quarrels.

They did not incommode us in any way, as they caroused all night long in pubs somewhere in the suburbs of Batum. And when they tried to get back to the Boarding House, they practically never reached it, but lay down anywhere, mainly in the shelter of some wall. There they were safe from the famous Batumi rain.

Therefore it was peaceful, even serene, in the Boarding House at night. A green night light, rather like those that burn in front of icons, burnt modestly in the hall. Only the yellow harbour rats ran at a heavy gallop through the corridors and into the kitchen to drink the water out of the tap. Cold, rusty water dripped out of the leaky tap, with an occasional change in the rhythm of the beat.

The lodgers appeared only in the late morning. Having sobered up, they passed the time away in sullenly washing, examining bruises on their bodies, cleaning their dirty and bespattered clothes, playing dice and occasionally fighting as a result of some shady move in the game.

Nirk would then come out of his room – tall, in well-ironed, bell-bottomed trousers and a clean vest. He would calmly draw a shiny, steel pistol out of his pocket and go off to establish peace among the fighters.

The sailors obeyed Nirk blindly, perhaps because he always smiled mysteriously and said, as he played with his pistol:

'You're wasting your calories, ye wanderers of the sea.'

These words he said in several languages, depending on the nationality of the fighters. They had a magic effect.

Apart from Nirk, his wife and myself the Boarding House was also inhabited by the charwoman Nyusya. To the lodgers she pretended to be deaf-and-dumb and at a sailor's first attempt to make a pass at her she would burst out laughing in such a bellowing and deafening bass, that she could be heard on the quayside. Nirk would immediately pop out of his room together with his steel pistol. The sailor would quickly disappear, delighted to be done so cheaply with 'the deaf-and-dumb hag'.

On the ground floor under the stairs lived the Kurdish boot-black. His blue, corrugated beard and even his plaintive brown

eyes, the size of horsechestnuts, exuded the smell of boot polish – a smell compounded of turpentine and floor polish. At least that is how it seemed to me.

The Kurd was as gentle as a dove. Besides, he never raised his voice to its full pitch, but murmured softly, again like a dove.

The Kurd liked telling people the simple story of his life. It mostly consisted of frequent slaughterings, and wanderings all over Asia Minor in search of escape from these slaughterings. 'Turks killed father,' he would murmur with a sigh. 'Turks killed mother, too. Turks killed brother. I am now all alone in the whole world.'

The Kurd had practically no work. The greater part of the day he passed in dozing or eating. After eating he took a long time licking his oily fingers, smacking his lips as he did so. This occupation of his had something simple and Biblical about it, like a nomad's mournful song.

The Boarding House was also inhabited by a shaggy black dog with yellow eyes which scrutinised one perhaps a little too closely. It was called Monomakh. But for that dog, we should certainly have been eaten by the rats, incredibly fierce and insolent as they were.

In one night they would gnaw through a thick floorboard in my room, and not in some corner of it, but right in the middle.

At dawn all Batumi rats went out to drink water at a stream at the back of the harbour. So did the Boarding House rats. They would come down from the attic in serried ranks along my outer window frame and jump ponderously on to the roof of the shed next door. I would wake up, and the feeling of disgust would keep me from falling asleep again. Their furious squeaks gave me a nervous shiver.

Many stone houses had special recesses with iron doors and a peep-hole. In these recesses policemen and porters would hide from the rats when they went off to drink in their thousands. To find oneself in the midst of them was mortally dangerous: they could tear a man to pieces.

The Batumi harbour-master – a lean, elegant captain – decided to exterminate the rats at one blow. Usually the rats went along

the streets in one solid mass, sometimes even in two layers, when the streets became narrow and the stream of rats could not be contained within their shores.

By the harbour-master's orders, fire engines were placed in courtyards one evening. No sooner did the rats invade the streets than the hoses were set to work pouring out kerosene on the rats.

But this did not stop the forward movement of the rats. Those at the back pressed on those in front and in the resulting congestion whole blocks of enraged rats started spinning round and round on the same spot. Burning tow was then thrown on them.

The rats were being burnt alive. They squealed and rushed about frantically in all directions, and then tore back to their holes in the harbour. Thereupon something happened which was unforseen either by the harbour-master or by the firemen: the burning rats dived under the stores and warehouses and half an hour later the Batum harbour was on fire.

It took two days to put out the fire. The ships stood out to sea. The harbour was surrounded by troops. The exquisitely elegant harbour-master paid for the fire with several years' jail.

The only thing that poisoned one's existence in Batum was the rats. But such is the fate of all harbour towns. In the end people cease to take any notice of them.

The Boarding House had its virtues which were beyond dispute. To begin with the house stood only some twenty paces away from the harbour, just opposite the old wooden landing stage with its half-rotten footboards.

Turkish feluccas and our schooners were moored there. The schooners the *Tri Brata* and the *Lev Tolstoy* were most frequently to be seen at the moorage. They brought peaches and tobacco from Sukhum and smuggled in vodka from Tuapse.

In my free time I could come down straight from my room to the landing stage, taking my fishing rod with me, and fish for toby or red mullet under the stern of a felucca. Sometimes even bass or ruff would bite.

The not very hot sun of late autumn lit the turbid, green water and the gaily painted stern of the felucca. The owners of the feluccas decorated their little craft like a bride. Some even put

brass on the gunwales and rubbed it with chalk. The stern was invariably painted in thick paint.

Essentially, the stern of every felucca was an ornamental picture or, in the language fashionable to-day, a work of abstract art. I do not want to go into the arguments regarding this art, but every multicoloured stern resembled an abstract carpet design with fantastic flowers and bright, irregular segments.

I made no attempt to understand the pictorial art of Turkish felucca painters. What it did was to blaze in the sun, send a gleam on the face and hands and be gaily, somehow even festively, reflected in the water.

One day Lucienna, Babel and his wife Evgenia came to the jetty. Babel laughed constantly and without any cause, and said, as if trying to justify himself, that it was sometimes pleasant to live in this world and breathe in the smell of tar and sea water. He held out to the sun his pale, slightly swollen hands, to warm them.

Evgenia Babel sat next to me on the jetty, dangling her feet. I gave her my fishing rod. She patiently waited for a fish to bite and peered attentively into the watery deep where jelly fish swayed as they breathed. Her heavy, chestnut-red hair was reflected in the water. She said that she was very tired and did not want to go anywhere else. Babel at that time was just about to change residence from Batum to Tiflis.

The fish refused to bite, and after a short silence, Evgenia said that she wanted to live only in Cape Zeleny, where they had a house standing right in the thick of tropical vegetation, and read and read and read. And if there were no new books (only one new Soviet book – Tarasov-Rodionov's *Chocolate* – had appeared in Batum at the time), she would re-read the whole of Chekhov or even Boleslav Prus or no matter whom.

Babel cast occasional furtive glances at Evgenia. I noticed for the first time, signs of perplexity on his face. It became quite childish. I even had the impression that Babel's lips were trembling. Some worry was troubling them both, and I, too, felt uneasy – the spectre of the old, family misfortunes of my youth rose up suddenly and inopportunely. It occurred to me that there was no greater happiness in the world than understanding between people who

are close to each other, and nothing more terrible than the dying of love – undeserved by those whose love it was, inexplicable, creeping into life with imperceptible insistence.

They went, but I remained sitting on the jetty for a long time, oblivious of my fishing line.

A huge ocean tanker, as long as a railway bridge, painted bright yellow with a cherry-coloured funnel, was creeping past me into the oil dock with the speed of the minute hand of a watch. On its bow I read the name *Ninon* and a little lower – 'Le Havre'.

I greatly prized the Boarding House for its proximity to life on the sea.

From there I could follow all that was happening in the harbour and on the sea: all the ships entering and leaving, all the white and frothy squalls between Batum and Poti all the multi-coloured sunsets, which looked like an exhibition of sculptured clouds or an exhibition of dusk and light, flame and darkness, silver and blood, hot gold and the feathers of unknown birds.

The sunsets resembled threatening, but in no way dangerous eruptions of distant volcanoes. Pilots could fly their aircraft safely through them without fear of burning or suffocation. The sunset air was clear and fresh: night had touched it with its cold sighs.

I sat quietly, all huddled up, afraid to miss any of the different shimmering hues, and felt a kind of twilight rapture. I cannot explain this, but sunsets seemed to me like explosions of inspiration (if it could assume a visible form). And I, of course, agreed that it was good to live on this old earth with its sunsets and rotted jetties, daisies and the hissing of steam in ships' engines.

There in Batum poetry seized me by the throat and firmly led me into captivity, a fascinated prisoner. Never since then have I been able or willing to escape from its clutches or forget its voice, be it for one moment.

That voice could be heard from afar as clearly as close to. It reached me from the north and from the west, from the east and from the south with extraordinary clarity, like the call of ocean waves, the call of all geographical space and all the enchantments with which the earth was so richly endowed.

There was no atom bomb then, and the dark death did not yet

threaten the world. Earth, water and air were free from the effects of man's violence. Our subconscious mind was not yet oppressed by atomic fear.

It was, I think, there, in Batum that I heard, for the first time, the voice of the Nereid, which in the past adorned the prows of ships – that voice 'gentle and langorous' which troubled Pushkin's nights.

And in the darkening dusk of the sea a ship's high prow rose before me and a bowsprit swathed in cables and a girl's chiselled profile and a Nereid's figure on the ancient prow sailing towards the shore – a reminder of the infinite wealth of dreams and the power of love.

The spirit of distant lands followed in the wake of the Nereid. And it seemed to me that the heart would not withstand the onslaught of these intoxicating thoughts, of a happiness as yet unshared with anyone, of an existence so free and winged, almost unreal and yet quite real, as real as a stone in the street.

One day a distant sound of gunfire reached the Boarding House from the sea.

Nirk with his steel pistol and a pair of binoculars immediately rushed out on the balcony.

Throughout the harbour there was consternation. From every watch-tower and every captain's bridge men were looking at the sea in the direction of the Anatolian coast, shrugging their shoulders, wondering what it could be.

From out there came the short, sharp thunder of guns, and bursts of flame appeared and died in the smoke and fog.

There was every sign of a sea-battle going on. But who was fighting whom? This was quite incomprehensible and mysterious and rather like the beginning of a historical novel for children.

The quay side by then was surrounded by troops. No one was allowed to go there.

Nirk and I were viewing that mysterious battle from the balcony. If, argued Nirk, this was an attack on us, why was the old Batum fortress silent?

'Who can attack us?' I asked Nirk.

'Anyone', he answered, with perfect equanimity. 'From Great

Britain to the Republic of Honduras. But there is no attack, because not a single shell has burst on our shore. The shells are all bursting in the sea around some contraption that looks like a floating circus.'

'You have an odd sense of humour,' I observed.

'Look for yourself.' Nirk handed me his binoculars.

With great difficulty I managed to discern something out at sea resembling a large tortoise, and some distance away from it – the outlines of two torpedo-boats.

All the evidence seemed to indicate that the torpedo boats were attacking the tortoise, and the tortoise was firing back and lazily belching out of its innards a greasy smoke which somehow *looked* as if it had a foul smell. But this did not bother the torpedo-boats and they continued firing right into the thick of the smoke.

'It's pelting along in our direction for all it's worth,' remarked Nirk, and at that same instant a thunderclap of iron shook the city and the mountains. Shells whined over our heads on their way out to sea.

'The forts!' cried Nirk. 'Our fortress! Now all is clear.'

'What's clear?'

'Clear that foreign ships have entered our territorial waters and the fortress is not letting them come closer.'

The sea-battle then developed as follows: the torpedo-boats turned and went back to sea, while the tortoise hoisted the white flag and some other incomprehensible flags, and calmly continued to crawl towards Batum, finally dropping anchor at the harbour entrance. Then we examined it and little by little were able to make out what had happened.

The tortoise turned out to be an old Turkish monitor (in Russian nautical terms – a coastal defence vessel). It was a flat sort of thing, squatting low on the surface of the water, rusty, with old guns and a funnel which had a gaping hole where it had been shot through.

When the monitor dropped anchor, the flags it carried immediately drooped as if they had fallen asleep. The greasy smoke ceased billowing out of the funnel. Immediately, a cutter of ours rushed out to the monitor.

Then the monitor was approached by the harbour tug, which dragged it nonchalantly into the harbour – the farthest and most deserted corner of it – and there the monitor moved as close as it could to old, corroded iron moorings.

About ten minutes later the monitor's rigging was entirely covered with the sailors' newly laundered underwear – mainly vests. The ship had fallen asleep and resembled a floating laundry. She had, obviously, had her last battle ever.

Nirk went off to see the naval authorities, and an hour later came back with all the news about the monitor.

The Greco-Turkish war was still being waged. Somehow or other (no one could quite explain how), the war caught two Greek torpedo-boats unawares in the Black Sea. These brisk and lively boats immediately gave battle to the one and only Turkish monitor. It had no time to take shelter in the Bosphorus under the powerful protection of the shore batteries.

The torpedo-boats chased the sick and elderly monitor all over the Black Sea without letting it draw breath. Finally, they chased it right into one corner of the sea, near Batum, and in their enthusiasm even rushed full speed into our waters.

The Batum fortress stopped them by firing a few shots at them and chased them away from the coast, while the monitor hoisted a signal to the effect that it was seeking shelter in our harbour and and agreed to be disarmed and interned.

And indeed, the monitor's guns were taken off. According to international law its crew should have come ashore and remained there for the rest of the war. But the crew showed no haste, due, so people said, to laziness.

In fact, the Turks could be observed, through binoculars, sitting on deck eating pilaff, drinking coffee, playing dice, darning their threadbare uniforms, searching for lice in each other's hair, or sleeping without a care in the world, with their feet in thick red stockings up on the hatches.

Sometimes, after furious yells from the boatswain, the crew would begin sweeping the deck. The dust would rise over the monitor like a flabby conflagration.

And sometimes the crew would even sing or rather drawl some

toneless and threatening, obviously warlike, song to the roll of drums. It did not in the slightest accord with the despondent and idle appearance of the sailors.

Chachikov greatly admired the song, considered it a model of war poetry, translated it into Russian and sang it to the broken chords of a guitar:

The sun is over the mountains
The dew in the valleys dries
And onward we go, while above us
Are heavily lowering skies.
Onward we go, faithful Moslems,
Our gaze is impulsive, but stern
We are the sons of the Prophet
And we shall never return.

But the interest aroused by the monitor did not last long. Soon it was forgotten, and then the war ended and it disappeared, probably retired into a port on the ochre-yellow Anatolian coast.

13
Prisoner of War Ulyansky

The *Mayak* newspaper was printed on a Boston. This was a small printing press. It was worked by foot. You had to press hard on a pedal, and the machine, which looked like a dentist's chair, would throw out printed sheets the size of a sheet of writing paper.

This was called album size. Indeed, it was no greater than a page of a lady's poetry album.

These short technical explanations should be enough to make you realize how difficult it was to cram RTA[20] telegrams, all naval news, articles, sketches and even stories into that newspaper. The microscopic *Mayak* wrote extensively about the need for the peoples of Asia Minor to unite. Batum belonged to Asia Minor, in a way, or at least to the Near East.

For all of us working on the *Mayak* this was a very congenial task. My old literary love for the East became infused with an unexpected, flesh-and-blood quality. All the things that had seemed so far away, the semi-religious, semi-political El-Baba movement, for instance, now appeared as something very near, something happening next door. Yesterday's myths became newspaper polemics.

Because of its small size and lack of space the *Mayak* favoured telegraphic style.

Our only young type-setter and printer, called Richard (he had a snub nose and was born in Melitopol), was fully justified in saying:

'This is not a newspaper; it's confetti!'

On his belt Richard wore a bedraggled holster for a Nagant-type

revolver, though he did not and could not have the revolver itself. The holster was for Richard an attribute of his imaginary dash and courage, and a source of constant misunderstandings with the police.

Finally, Richard's holster was taken away from him. Thereupon he lost all his cockiness, quietened down and assumed a more thoughtful attitude to life.

It was the first time I had met a man who was interested in nothing but weapons. To carry a revolver – a 'gun' in his language – was his only aim and joy in life. Sometimes he would chuck his work, would come to see me in my editorial office in the Boarding House, throw his cap angrily on the table and say in despair:

'I'll join the police, I swear I will. They'll give me a Mauser. At a distance of ten paces it makes a hole right through an inch-thick oak-wood board. One, two and bob's your uncle!'

Russian peasants say about a man like this that he has no soul, only steam. To my great relief I was able to get rid of him soon. I never liked weapons even as a little boy. They always appeared to me coated with human blood. And people playing with weapons in order to show off gave me a feeling of revulsion all the greater because often these people were cowardly and rather stupid.

After Richard the type was set by a limp and completely deaf young man. The compositors gave him the queer Chekhovian nickname 'Sleepy'.

Very soon the *Mayak* acquired a whole human gallery in the shape of its staff. Frankly, each one of them is worth a story to himself.

The first to step into the editor's office was a man as thin as a rake and green from hunger, who introduced himself as former proof-reader of the Petersburg newspaper *Rech*. For two years he had been a prisoner of war in Germany and on his way back to Russia had fetched up in Batum without ever meaning to. His name was Ulyansky. A yellow strip, such as all p.o.w.s wore, was sewn into a sleeve of his shabby and very insubstantial jacket.

It was hard to understand how a man who was going to his mother in Ryazan, had fetched up in Batum instead.

'Very simple,' explained Ulyansky sitting at the kitchen table in

the editor's office, and swallowing back his saliva. On the table lay a fresh chunk of bread and a piece of sausage; there was also a chipped enamel tea pot. 'Very simple,' he repeated. 'Our group got into the very thick of it. To begin with, they pushed us out of our echelon several times a day, enlisted us into various gangs, threatened to bump us off, and finally kicked us out of the railway carriages altogether. "Stump off to anywhere you like, to bloody hell for all we care, only don't stay here and get in the way. You'll get to your destination on foot all right and will thank us, too, because we don't make you fight." "Fight whom?" we would ask. They would give us a different answer every time and a confused one at that: the Grigory band, they would say, or Makhno, or the Galicians or the boss of some gang or other – Pereplyuy-Kashuba or Zinziper. It was then we fully realized the wretched situation we were in. One of the p.o.w.s invented a slogan: "Join anyone who'll feed you." Some of us did so, and only three of us out of the whole echelon stood out. Still, we decided to make our way eastwards somehow, back to our homes. We zig-zagged up and down the country all the time, to avoid the dangerous, explosive spots.

'At first we were slowly pressed northwards, then back again in a south-westerly direction and then suddenly we were thrown right up to the Don – and beyond the Don, the village of Tikhoretskaya. There we were press-ganged into doing compulsory labour and sent to Tuapse. And from Tuapse to Batum is no distance at all. I reached this place alone: my friends stayed behind.

'Now there's one thing I don't understand, the main thing – where am I? In old Russia or in Soviet Russia? And who am I? Have I the right to live or am I a dead man, and knocking about this earth merely through an oversight? I'm saying this to you because I simply must discover what is happening and feel I am a man and not a target such as I felt I have been these last three years. But for this I need work, even of the most wretched kind. And that's how I came to you. I read the notice on the door of the Boarding House and came in.'

He spoke quietly, with conviction, but never raised his eyes and looked all the time at his torn, rugged boots. The skin on his face

and hands was dull and grey from the coal dust which had eaten into his pores.

'Where do you sleep at night?'

'In the goods station. In empty goods trucks.'

'Wait a minute.'

I went to see Nirk. I had to get permission for Ulyansky to sleep in the Boarding House and this had to be discussed.

Nirk immediately agreed. He was a kind, easy-going fellow. His only serious defect was long conversations about calories. Nirk converted everything, every glass of tea, into calories. He was, so to speak, calorie-struck and assured me that he would force his organism to produce the same amount of calories every day, would not allow them to jump up and down and would, therefore, live to be at least a hundred.

I went back to the editorial room and looked with surprise at Ulyansky; great beads of sweat were pouring down his unshaven cheeks. There was nothing on the table. I could not discover one crumb of bread or a single slice of sausage.

I pretended nothing had happened. But Ulyansky realized, of course, that the sudden and mysterious disappearance of my pathetic daily ration could not pass unnoticed. His head and hands were trembling.

What I was afraid of most was that I would do something tactless and offend Ulyansky.

I showed him the box room where he could pass the night, but he refused, saying that he was used to the fresh air and therefore preferred goods trucks, seeing that the autumn in Batum was very mild. Then he said that he would like to write for the *Mayak* a short sketch on the subject of the Batum port. I agreed.

Two days later Ulyansky brought me the sketch. He had written it in blue pencil on the back of a railway invoice. The lines of the invoice colums got in the way of the text and it was impossible to read it. I gave Ulyansky some paper and made him copy out his sketch afresh.

Then I read the sketch while Ulyansky drank the tea (on which he kept blowing) with saccharine, and ate stale bread, and looked at me out of a corner of his eye.

The sketch reminded me of the best writings of Kuprin. It was just as fresh, vivid and rich in lively detail. It was difficult to believe that the sketch was Ulyansky's first literary work, but he swore it was.

I published the sketch and paid Ulansky his fee, and ever since then he sat all day long in the editorial office and helped me in everything. He even learned how to set up type and whenever 'Sleepy' was dropping from tiredness, which happened to him fairly often, Ulyansky would work the printing press with his foot for him.

Ulyansky wrote easily, but well. I and, later, Babel and Frayerman (he soon bobbed up in Batum) liked Ulyansky's manner of portraying people's inner characters by way of hardly perceptible outward signs and characteristics.

Thus, in one sketch he was describing the skipper of a British tanker, the *Cargo*. He called this sketch 'The Mackintosh'. The actual detailed description dealt with the new mackintosh which he had seen the skipper wear. But all the qualities of the mackintosh – cold and slightly clammy, smelling of disinfectant, crackly and awkward, grey as a rainy sky – all these qualities were transmitted to the owner of the mackintosh, the *Cargo*'s skipper.

His face, wrote Ulyansky, seemed cut out of a piece of mackintosh and made one think of his skin as something thin, cold and slippery like a frog. The colour of the skipper's eyes was indistinguishable from the colour of the mackintosh – all British boredom, banality and coldness of heart were reflected in those dull and empty eyes. These eyes were never surprised nor were they delighted at anything.

Everywhere on their travels the skipper and his mackintosh were accompanied by long drawn-out tedium which marked the passage of time by an occasional barking out of a few English words. The skipper clicked them out stingily as if on a calculating machine, in the course of the long day on board the ship.

I do not guarantee that I am being absolutely exact in my rendering of Ulyansky's style of writing, but that was its general effect.

Ulyansky aroused natural respect. He never spoke without

having something to say, and had suffered the whole of his period of captivity in silence, storing up inside him his observations and anger.

After about a month of working with us in the *Mayak* he came in early one morning and said, trying not to look at me, that in an hour's time he was leaving Batum for Baku where he had an aunt.

'Can't sit in one place,' he confessed in a toneless voice. 'Horrible, I find it.'

'Do you,' I asked, 'intend going to Baku on foot?'

'Naturally! I've already come on foot all the way from Mariupol to Batum. And they put me up against the wall to shoot me three times in all. Only three times. I'll reach Baku on foot all right.'

And he vanished, to reappear unexpectedly in Moscow two years later on his way from Murom to Leningrad – again from one aunt to another. Once more he was doing it on foot.

I made a joke about his numerous aunts, and he smiled in reply and said:

'I can't help it if it's true. As I go on my way I imagine to myself how these dear old things in Leningrad – Aunt Glafira and Aunt Polya (they live in the Pryazhka district now) – will welcome me after the many years that I have been missing, how they'll get ready a simple supper, how the windows of the little house will become misty with the steam of the samovar, how comfortable the creaking sofa in the shade of the potted fig-tree will seem to me, what a beautiful sleep will descend on me to take away my weariness; but even through my sleep I shall hear the whistles of boats on the Neva and will await the morning when, as if for the first time, the whole panorama of the Neva and its banks – the most beautiful panorama in the world – will again and again be unfolding itself before my eyes in one grand sweep.'

'Yes,' I said, caught up in his restrained excitement. 'Yes. . . . "On Neva's banks – the embassies of nations, the Admiralty building, sun and quiet. . . ." '

'I remember you reading this poem in the Boarding House in Batum,' said Ulyansky with a smile. 'Well, all the best. We'll meet again.'

But we never met again. A year later I received a parcel from

Chigirin, a town in the Ukraine. The parcel contained a book by Ulyansky. It was called, I think, *Notes in Captivity* and was published in Leningrad.

From the few words written in ink on the cover of the book I gathered that Ulyansky was again tramping round the country, this time probably in search of some aunt in the Ukraine.

The book had a tough, vigorous style and had, I should say, a pitiless quality about it.

Soon after that in Moscow I bought another book by Ulyansky, *The Shaggy Jacket*, with a preface by Fedin. I learned from the preface that Ulyansky had recently died of typhus in Leningrad.

Ulyansky began as a very considerable writer. And I felt bitterly sad at the loss of that man who had not had time to recover from his captivity and who had written his excellent books in complete solitude. I felt bitterly sad, too, at the thought that never again would his beloved Black Sea breeze – or 'zephyr', as he used to say in affectionate mockery – blow in his face.

14
The Lighthouse Keeper

We like the protecting light of lighthouses, but seldom stop to examine it. Only officers of the watch and men at the steering wheel peer closely at it, as they read the mystery of its flashes. For all lighthouses in the same sea flash and wink differently so that ships can tell which lighthouse it is and determine their position.

So did the Batum lighthouse shed its light for many years and nobody took any interest in the life of Stavraki, its keeper. Particularly since its light could hardly be seen from the town. It fell on the sea.

Stavraki was a specialist in lighthouses. He was the first to bring an article to the *Mayak*. (It dealt with some kind of new lighthouse lamps).

Stavraki sat in the office for about half an hour and went, leaving all three of us – Babel, Ulyansky and me – with the impression of an unpleasant and cynical man.

A hard, grey stubble grew on his yellow cheeks, and his inflamed eyes spoke of many bottles of vodka drunk over the last few days.

He was carelessly dressed, all crumpled as if he had been lying on his bed for days without bothering to undress.

He frequently coughed, the heavy cough of a man who had been smoking cheap tobacco.

He took a dislike to Babel, to those sharp eyes of his, and once said to me angrily:

'What's he gazing at me for, that fellow with glasses? I hate those gazers. A fisher of men's souls! But what is concealed in

my soul no one bloody well knows. And he doesn't either. And never will. I bet you. I may be an old thief, for all he knows. Or a murderer. Or may be the white slave traffic is my line. Or perhaps I am the gentlest of grandfathers. Let him rack his brains for a bit.'

Another time he said:

'To be a lighthouse keeper you must clean forget your past. Then you'll never forget to light the lamp.'

'But have there been cases when lamps have not been lit?' I asked.

'Only if the keeper died,' replied Stavraki and smiled wryly. 'Or went mad. And only if he happened to be alone in the lighthouse at the time. And there was no one to take his place. Either wife or daughter.'

'Have you got a family?' I asked, and immediately felt that I had committed an error of tact, which was as yet beyond my capacity to comprehend.

He replied rudely and with some irritation:

'If you want to get on with people, young man, you must mind your own business. Take a sheet of paper and put down on it all the subjects which must not be mentioned out of idle curiosity.'

'Rudeness,' I said, 'does you no honour.'

Stavraki extracted a flat eau de cologne flask out of the pocket of his duffle-coat, took a few gulps, and eyeing me narrowly said in an admonishing tone of voice:

'Your style is a little high falutin'. The difference in our ages calls for a respectful attitude on your part. And as to honour, how do you know I have any? Perhaps you and I never have had, haven't now and never shall have any. And anyway, what is honour? You'll much oblige us if you write an article on this subject in your paper for the seamen of the Gagry-Batum coast. Perhaps then we shall understand.'

Just then Ulyansky came in.

'Hail to you, prisoner-of-war,' remarked Stavraki. 'Now you and I,' he continued, turning to me, 'consider this young man to be honest only because we know damn all about him. Honesty is ignorance.'

'Cheap, pseudo-intellectual chatter,' said Ulyansky calmly. 'The philosophy of sots!'

Stavraki slowly picked up an empty vodka bottle standing on the table, swivelled it round and round in his hand, carefully examined the label and suddenly raised it with a quick gesture as if to throw it at Ulyansky or smash it on his skull. I seized Stavraki by the sleeve of his jacket. He tore himself away, turned to the wide-opened window and flung the bottle with all his might against the chimney on a neighbouring roof. The bottle broke. Bits of glass poured tinkling down the roof.

'I aim straight,' said Stavraki, 'too much so, even.'

He turned quickly on his heels and went out.

'Psychopath!' I said.

'No,' replied Ulyansky, 'not a psychopath; a scoundrel.'

I protested, but Ulyansky refused to argue.

When I had seized the old man by the sleeve of his jacket, there was a short ripping noise – the old jacket gave way and split. I was feeling ashamed of having torn the wretched man's jacket. I was ready to run after him and tell him I was sorry.

A few days later I was returning by launch from Chakva to Batum. Evening had fallen. The sea, as always at dusk, stretched out far into the boundless mist, and the launch seemed to be on the brink of a quiet abyss and to be knocking with its motor out of fright. The lighthouse – man's last refuge – hung low over the silent desert of water.

A feeble light shone in one of its windows. Over it, triumphant and predatory, flashed the lighthouse lamp, as if throwing down a challenge to night and nature.

I remembered Stavraki. What was he thinking about, alone in his lighthouse? Was he going over, in his own mind, the events of his youth, sorting out his past, like wild flowers in a herbarium? Or was he reading a book, trying to find in it something to comfort him in his luckless life?

Again I felt sorry for the old man, but the very next morning my feeling of pity for him vanished for a reason both unexpected and terrible.

The Batum lighthouse keeper Stavraki turned out to be in

fact, the Lieutenant Stavraki of the Black Sea Fleet, who in March 1906 had shot Lieutenant Schmidt[21] on the island of Berezan.

The night I sailed past the lighthouse in the launch Stavraki was arrested and tried.

In obedience to some inner compulsion and feeling of disgust, I gathered together the manuscripts of Stavraki's articles in the office and burned them. Had it been possible I should have burned my own hand which had shaken Stavraki's. Anyway I took the old garden bench on cast iron legs, on which Stavraki used to sit, threw it out of the office and brought in several stools instead.

I don't know which writer, which of the great delvers into human souls could have written about the soul, the black soul, of Stavraki, could have followed the tortuous path of infamy in the heart and mind of that man. Balzac perhaps? Or Dostoyevsky?

'No,' I reflected, unable to sleep at night and choking at the thought that only a short time ago that man was sitting in that very room. Darkness seemed to me saturated with his sour breath – a smoker's breath and an alcoholic's. 'No, not Dostoyevsky! He could have written about him, of course, but he would never have been willing to. Never! Because man's natural goodness could be extinguished for ever in a suffering heart through contact with Stavraki's life.'

That life of his was just a series of acts of blackest treachery. And these acts of treachery developed out of petty bits of nonsense: out of a desire to wear just one more pip on his shoulder straps and cut a dash in women's eyes, out of servile fear of all authority – from porter to emperor, out of lust for a rich, carefree life, without a worry in the world, avidly sucking the marrow out of life, and raping pretty servant girls because this, for him, took the place of love. On condition, of course, that there was no risk involved.

Stavraki and Schmidt graduated from the Naval College together. Throughout their school years they shared the same desk. And all those years Stavraki was racked with envy of Schmidt.

He envied him his high-mindedness, his courage and his readiness for self-sacrifice. He envied him as a future hero, tribune and leader.

He knew that Schmidt was capable of all this and that these

qualities of his would, if life allowed, give Schmidt a world-wide fame.

By then Maxim Gorki had made his famous comparison between some men and blind worms, and Stavraki, the smart naval officer cadet, hated that 'Volga tramp' for having peered right into his conscience and contemptuously turned away.

When Stavraki and Schmidt were saying good-bye to each other after graduation, Schmidt said to Stavraki:

'You, Misha, have no fixed standards for your conscience to go by.'

'I certainly have!' replied Stavraki crossly. 'What's this habit of yours of trying to get into other people's consciences?'

'Even if you do have standards,' added Schmidt and peered closely at Stavraki, 'they are made of rubber rather than steel. Take care not to slip into something nasty. While it's not too late.'

'This is my business!' replied Stavraki challengingly. 'Anyway, I shall not marry a prostitute in order to save her and shed tears together over her wretched past, the way you intend to do!'

'Enough!' said Schmidt with anger in his voice. 'We shall go each his own way. I can only pray God that our ways never meet.'

So they parted, to meet again on the island of Berezan the day of the execution.

Dawn, gloomy and cold, was oozing in from somewhere, making its way out of the cursed steppes. Schmidt and the sailors were taken off the launch and led to some posts standing in readiness.

It was Stavraki who was the officer in charge of the execution.

As Schmidt went past him Stavraki knelt and said:

'Forgive me, Petya, if you can! . . .'

'Get up, Misha!' replied Schmidt without halting. 'And stop clowning! Better tell your men to aim straight.'

What did Stavraki feel? Nothing, obviously, but a desire to get rid of Schmidt – of that living reproach – as quickly as possible. But as from that moment Schmidt made it difficult for Stavraki to live and feel in harmony with the world and with himself.

Stavraki rose to his feet, hastily brushed the dust off his trousers and finished off the execution quickly and somehow desperately,

trying not to glance at Schmidt and hiding behind the sailors' backs.

And one mean thought tormented him until Schmidt fell face downward on the ground: did Schmidt know that Stavraki was the only officer of the Black Sea fleet who had agreed, of his own free will, to execute him? All the officers, even the arch-monarchists, had refused point blank to do it.

Soon Stavraki noticed that his brother-officers carefully avoided having to shake hands with him.

From then on he tried both in the service and in his private life to be as inconspicuous as possible, took to avoiding people, lived to witness the revolution, fled from Sebastopol and while the mensheviks were in power took on the job of lighthouse keeper in Batum. And remained lighthouse keeper until the coming of the Soviet regime.

But I see that I shall have to repeat, to some extent, the sad story of Lieutenant Schmidt. I have written about it once and therefore beg my readers' forgiveness should I in any way repeat myself. Literature, like life itself, is wide and varied. There are occasions when whole pieces must be torn out of an old context and inserted into a new context, to give it full life and vigour.

In Stavraki's case there was one strange circumstance: nobody could understand why he continued to live under his real name right up to the time of his arrest, why he did not change it immediately after the revolution. When the examining magistrate asked him about it, Stavraki replied:

'They would have found me under any name anyway. And the sooner the better. They've been looking for me too long as it is!'

Even the magistrate was puzzled by this answer, and asked:

'So you don't regret what has happened?'

'This is none of your business!' replied Stavraki.

He was precise if chary in his evidence.

His last words were short and stunned everyone in court.

'Anyway,' he said quietly, and with a sigh of relief, 'the whole of this tedious business is over, thank God. I'm getting what I deserve – a dogs' death.'

Even the judges started and looked intently at Stavraki. He

stood, looking down and carefully pulling a thread out of a torn sleeve of his duffle-coat. He never said another word.

We were all shocked by this case. We realized that Stavraki had set us all a most difficult psychological problem, but no one could solve it. One could say 'repentance', as Sinyavsky did, or 'a monstrous piece of play acting', as did Ulyansky, or 'complete spiritual bankruptcy' – this is what I thought – the sense of which tormented him day by day, hour by hour and turned his life into hell.

In the end we came to no conclusion. Babel left for Tiflis taking his family with him. The lighthouse continued to cast its light over the sea.

Much later I discovered that Stavraki had a young wife. After his trial and execution she vanished. In the lighthouse Stravraki did not live alone; he had his wife and a number of friends – private traders. The friends fled from the lighthouse as soon as Soviet authorities took over in Batum. By then Stavraki called himself an anarcho-communist.

One thing always amazes me: we walk along the surface of life and have no idea, no conception even, how many great tragedies and noble deeds, how much sorrow, heroism, infamy and despair have been, and are, taking place on any patch of land we happen to be living on. We haven't the slightest suspicion of any of these things.

And yet, the knowledge of any such patch of land can introduce us into a world of men and events worthy of being included in the history of mankind or in the annals of great, immortal literature.

For example, no one suspects that the Batum lighthouse is connected with a great tragedy – with the death of Lieutenant Schmidt.

Only occasionally, in the endless autumn nights, when the sea drove on to the shore flocks of waves raging in unabating fury, the darkness around the lighthouse seemed much deeper than anywhere else. There was something hopeless and distressing about it.

It made one long for the warmth of rooms where little children

sleep with parted lips, and the world lives a quiet life within the circle of light made by a lamp.

Nobody would believe it if told that that little boy with curly hair who had just sighed in his deep, serene sleep or that girl who had, for some reason, been crying in her sleep, might in a few years' time become traitors, villains, murderers, might shoot innocent people and torture them, might violate the freedom of human thought, summon nations to mutual hatred and start wars in the name of their criminal ambition or bestial greed.

People would not believe it – and they would be wrong. This was the bitterest thing of all to realize for a poor heart, which had lived through a thousand sorrows, but had remained honest. And therefore the one important thing seemed to me to be the unity of all men of good will. And also the creation of a literature of truth and clear conscience.

It was this that made it essential for me to live, work, suffer and refuse to give up.

Schmidt had been the victim of much treachery or, to put it in an old-fashioned way, had suffered many blows of fate.

Stavraki had reproached Schmidt, in the heat of their argument, that he was marrying a prostitute out of false considerations of humanity.

Schmidt's youth had partly coincided with the famous 'going to the people' movement,[22] with the appeal to save 'fallen' women and share with the people all the hardships of its existence.

Young Schmidt had often frequented the Populist[23] set of Shelgunov and his friends.

A passionate man, he was all for firm action instead of firm words. Therefore he really did marry a prostitute, because he wanted to save her.

But their life in common went awry right from the first – Schmidt's wife was not even literate. For a long time, but with scant success, Schmidt tried to teach her to read. But he never succeeded in making her like books.

Schmidt had a son from her, totally unlike himself. They soon separated, and Schmidt left her everything. Soon after his execution

she sold his things and published small advertisements in reactionary papers: 'Lieutenant Schmidt's uniform jacket for sale', 'Lieutenant Schmidt's 'cello for sale'.

This was one of the treacheries which dogged Schmidt's footsteps in life.

But the blackest of all, the rarest in its infamy, was, of course Stavraki's treachery.

And at last something happened in Schmidt's life, something which now looks like fiction, something very bitter. A long time ago I wrote about it on the strength of what Lieutenant Schmidt's sister told me and also using some old source material. At the present day it all looks somewhat different.

What happened, in short, was this:

. . . A summer day in Kiev. Sultry heat. Faded five-fingered leaves of chestnut trees. The young naval officer Schmidt found himself in Kiev between trains. He was travelling from the Danube to Sebastopol.

Being a Kiev man myself I know well what boredom is in Kiev on a summer's day. It fell to Schmidt to experience it. It was the kind of boredom when the smell of 'home dinners' drifts out of every house, and anything interesting that could happen in life seems to have fled ten thousand miles away. Only a barrel organ, out of tune, churned out the horrid little German song: 'Augustin, Augustin, oh, Du lieber Augustin!'

Where could one go? Ah, the races! There was horse-racing in Kiev. So Schmidt went off to the race-course. He was in luck: the race-course was in Pechersk, a warm, melancholy, deserted quarter, lying higher than the rest of the town.

At the race-course Schmidt noticed a young woman of astounding beauty – so he thought. He was a romantic. He often saw in life no more than what he wanted to see.

He fell in love with that woman the moment he saw her (as he could have fallen in love with all pretty women all over the world). He was convinced, for some reason, that she was Spanish. Why? Because of the dark sparkle of her eyes and her deep, restrained laughter. When the woman laughed, her throat twitched like that of a singing-bird.

Spain. . . . He had seen its shores in the flinty distance, cut off from the sky by the deep blue of the sea – a razor-sharp cut.

Here I could write a great deal, but I have promised a short narrative of events and I am restraining my hand.

Schmidt lost the Spanish woman in the crowd. He reacted to this as if it had been a disaster, though in his heart of hearts he realized that if one loved a woman one could always find her.

He took the evening train for Sebastopol. Now here my age gives me certain advantages relatively to most of my readers. Because I used to travel a lot then and have a clear recollection of what trains and railway carriages looked like.

You must realize that carriages were lit by wax candles in metal lanterns. The candle flame danced about with so much vigour and variety of movement that every carriage resembled a shadow theatre. The shadows swarmed, appeared and vanished, and people's features became changing and uncertain like reflections in the water. An ugly man might well pass for one of good looks and attraction, and a beautiful woman for an old hag.

A woman took her seat in the carriage opposite Schmidt. He started, pulled himself together, made a gesture with his hand in front of his face as if chasing away senseless shadows, and suddenly he felt as if someone's hands clutched at his heart and squeezed it. No doubt about it, the woman opposite was she: the Spanish woman from the race-course. Surely, God Himself in whom he allowed himself to disbelieve, had brought her into this dark 2nd class carriage.

They started talking. The woman was going to Darnitsa, a holiday resort near Kiev, with sand and ancient pines.

The train to Darnitsa takes thirty minutes. In the course of them Schmidt threw the whole of his life at the woman's feet and joyfully admitted to himself that he loved her.

They exchanged addresses, and the woman left transfigured by this whirlwind of love. For there is probably no woman in the world who would not blossom out like the most beautiful dawn in spring if she knew that she had become the cause of sudden love.

Then came Sebastopol. A tempestuous year. A fleet set on fire

by the revolution. Spasmodic correspondence with the woman from Kiev. Schmidt was imaginative and passionate in his letters, the woman flirtatious and prosaic in hers. Schmidt never noticed this.

The name of Schmidt – tribune and leader – was echoing through the world. His courage and devotion to the people caused love for him to spring up in the hearts of millions.

That was fame! That was greatness!

But then came the mutiny, blood on the surface of Sebastopol bays, Schmidt's two telegrams, one a menacing cry, the other an entreaty.

One telegram was to the emperor Nicholas the Second: 'BLACK SEA FLEET REFUSES TO OBEY YOUR MINISTERS' ORDERS AND DEMANDS CONVOCATION OF CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY. LIEUTENANT SCHMIDT, O.C. FLEET.' The second telegram was for her, the woman from Kiev: 'COME AT ONCE. MAY NEVER SEE EACH OTHER AGAIN.'

The mutiny was quashed. Schmidt was arrested, taken to the quiet little town of Ochakov and, together with a few sailors, made to face a court martial.

Schmidt's sister, Anna Izbash, came to Ochakov to see him. He asked his sister to go to Kiev, find the woman and bring her to Ochakov: he would die more readily if he could see her if only for a short time before his execution.

His sister was in despair: Schmidt's last hours were running out, and she had to leave him and waste time for the sake of her brother's love for an unknown woman.

She went to Kiev and discovered from the woman's entirely unsuspecting former husband that the woman was not in town. Anna Izbash then told the husband everything. And such was Schmidt's charm, such the power of his name, that the husband went off into the depths of the Poltava country together with Anna Izbash, found his wife and urged her to go and see Schmidt.

Schmidt was allowed an interview with this woman. She entered his cell and for a moment he started back. Because the woman who entered his cell was the woman he had seen in the half-dark carriage, lit by the dim and flickering flame of a candle, but not the woman to whom he had written his inspired letters.

But nevertheless he was infinitely grateful to her for coming to comfort him in his last few hours.

Many years later, in the winter of 1935, I met Schmidt's sister, Anna Izbash, in Sebastopol.

From her room in the Severnaya Hotel where she was staying, one could see the Artilleriysky Bay – the spot where Schmidt, who had jumped into the sea with his small son from the burning and sinking *Ochakov*, was picked up by a torpedo-boat and taken aboard the *Rostislav*. There Schmidt was arrested.

A grey fog was hanging over Sebastopol the day I was there. The fog made the Sebastopol streets appear more deserted than ever. They only came to life in the evenings when the crews of ships were allowed on shore. But at midday Sebastopol was as quiet and empty as at night.

A little old woman, thin and nervous, with an extraordinarily kind smile and firm, young eyebrows sat facing me in a soft armchair which seemed to swallow her up.

She talked of Schmidt and called him Petrusha, and in her eyes he obviously was at most a midshipman, if not a smooth-faced cadet.

'All his life he had been an enthusiast and always disregarded his own interests' – that, in her view, was her brother's main characteristic. 'He lived for other people, was fond of sailors as if they had been small children, was often bitterly disappointed, but never allowed himself to become gloomy or fall into despair. He was a very passionate, impressionable man. Lived on his nerves. Entirely on his nerves. In my youth I was a tiny bit like my brother, myself. He was fond of books, of poetry, especially Byron – he read him in the original – music, children and anything to do with the navy. Especially lighthouses, for some reason. He left behind him a whole collection of engravings and photographs of the world's more remarkable lighthouses. He even had secret hopes of becoming a lighthouse keeper, but it had to be a lighthouse far away from any town. "I'm damned if I care where it is," he used to say, "in Tarakhankut for all I care! In the day time I'd go out into the steppe with a gun to do a bit of shooting, or else I'd excavate the barrow near the lighthouse. They say it's Scythian

and contains a lot of household utensils and arrows, all buried in it. I'd dig and get sun-tanned and my lungs would be saturated with the resin from all those resinous herbs that grow out there, and in the evening I'd wash myself all over with river water and sit in the lighthouse cabin next to the lamp and read books. I'd count the sunsets and the dawns, and the lights of ships and enter their names in the log book.

'"And I'd sleep lightly at night, trying not to miss the sound of the wind ringing the alarm bell. And in a storm I'd be deafened by the roar of the waves, the ravings of the furious sea, the foam which flies up to heaven to reach the very sun, the cries of sea-gulls – have you noticed how during storms their cries pierce the misty air like needles? Wouldn't that be marvellous, Anna!" Altogether he was the most peaceful and kindest man in the world, and no one in his family could ever have imagined him leading a mutiny.'

When Anna Izbash was going back home to Leningrad I saw her off at the cosy little railway station, where huge poplars stood rustling on the platform a couple of yards away from the hot carriages of the express train. The smell of the dry leaves which had remained since autumn filled the air and even smothered the familiar railway smell of coal and oil.

As I write the memory comes back to me of the many people I have met and seen off next to these poplars which have for some time now been the mute witnesses of my life.

The poplars always reminded me, for no reason I could define or understand, of Grechaninov's nostalgic love song: 'She will not forget, she will come back and give her love for ever.'

Why I used to think of this love-song at the Sebastopol station I do not know. Its words concealed a yearning and a hope for a happy, be it only a momentary, love and a release from loneliness. I often had a dim, dull feeling of loneliness.

Strangely enough, the station poplars in Sebastopol are said to have survived the last war.

15
A Gay Companion

In the streets of Batum I used often to meet a little man in an old coat which was always unbuttoned. He was smaller than me, that cheerful citizen – cheerful, that is, if his eyes were a guide.

I had friendly feelings towards anyone who was smaller than me. It was simply that the presence of such people made my life easier somehow. My own lack of inches no longer made me self-conscious.

When I was a child my tender-hearted sister Galya invented to comfort me a somewhat unconvincing theory that almost all gifted men were small. Galya quoted many examples Pushkin, Napoleon, Lermontov, Dickens, Dumas, Vroubel, Schopenhauer.

But the whole of Galya's theory broke into smithereens at the very mention of such famous giants as Turgenev, Christian Andersen, Maupassant, Chekhov and Gorki.

I liked small men, but despised those who tried to appear taller by having their coats cut in some special way or by wearing high-heeled shoes. For example, I recognized Balmont[24] to be a gifted poet, but did not like him because of his foppish boots with heels almost as high as those women wore. I saw him once in those boots in Kiev at his lecture on 'the Magic of Poetry'.

The little man scurrying round Batum always carried an umbrella under his arm. His coat pockets were stuffed with tangerines and often the neck of a vodka bottle would send a glitter out of one of his pockets.

The fact that the little man never parted from his umbrella was a reminder of the famous Batum rains.

No town in Russia has such a rainfall. Not for nothing did the French sailors nickname Batum a 'pissoir' – 'le pissoir de la Mer Noire'.

In the summer there were showers which poured rivers of water with a roar on roofs of houses. But it was not the showers that were typical for Batum.

The typical real Batumi rains came from the west and fell ceaselessly and monotonously, as if someone had wound them up. The sky, laden with stormy clouds which stifled any gleams of light and plunged Batum even at midday into a murky dusk, lay heavily on the town. And the dusk seemed to run babbling and spluttering down all the gutters, flow into the foamy sea, dissolve in it and cloud the water.

The sirens of angry ships roared hoarsely in the murk and the wet decks gleamed and glittered. The weak gloss of the ships' grey, red, black and yellow paint seemed like an echo of distant sunshine. It was a reminder that the merest change of wind would make the whole of Batum glitter in the sun like a pile of bluish glass. Streaks of warm air and steam, visible to the naked eye, would rise to the sky from the heated houses and streets. And diaphanous cannas – the most conspicuous flowers in the front gardens of Batum – would glow the colour of wine or blood in the rays of the sun.

Rains in Batum could last for weeks. My shoes never got dry. But for this fact, which caused attacks of malaria, I should very soon have reconciled myself to the rains.

There was a lot, after all, that was good about them. To begin with, the somewhat sharp air, smelling of sprats. Secondly the solemn oratorio of several thousand gutters singing in chorus all over the city. Thirdly, the low, grey light and the lamps lit in the middle of the day. Lamplight during such rains as these seems cosy and helps people to read, and even to declaim poetry.

And we used to declaim it to each other – the little man and I. His name was Frayerman, but he was called in different ways on different occasions: Ruvim Isaevich, Ruvim, Ruvetz, Ruva, Ruvochka, and even Kheruvim.[25] This last nickname was invented by Misha Sinyavsky and no one used it but he.

Sometimes we declaimed poetry all night long in my room which was also an office, and went to bed in the early hours of the morning – hungry, but happy – one on a narrow bunk, the other on a small wooden sofa.

I did not so much see as feel the rain clouds stopped over Batum by the mountains of Lesser Caucasus – whole archipelagos of clouds, many-tiered, with the ponderous layers heaped one on top of the other and torn to rags at the base. Saturn sparkled above them somewhere in the infinite beyond of outer space; its ashen grey light shone over the lazily whirling mass of cloudy earth.

We felt excited reading verses like these:

At midnight from the East arises Saturn,
A corpse – like lead we see it shine.
Creator! Works both ominous and cruel
In truth are Thine!

Men of maturer age than Frayerman and myself might have been driven to rather sad reflections on reading these ominous verses. For us they represented a model of vivid imagery and powerful language. Batumi nights were all the richer for them.

Then we read other verses, clean and light like the sun restored.

I was always fond of poetry, but it had never formed part of my life quite as naturally as in Batum then.

Poetry lost its verbal essence and became a fact of life in the same way as rain, as human voices, as the cries of mules tired out by the night rains, as birth and death.

All these poetry-reading nights were accompanied by the unceasing hubbub of the rain and sometimes, too, by the sound of the waves which reached the harbour.

The splatter of the rain provided a background on which certain verses stood out with a prominence all their own, and we therefore repeated them several times over.

Here are some of them:

On glossy ivy, jasmine blossoms drift
Like butterflies' bright wings.
The hours flow slowly by and on the paving

A poem, a half-effaced engraving,
Wordlessly sings.

Or these others:

I'm cold. The spring, transparent, limpid
Clothes Petropol in emerald-coloured down.

Or again:

The silent steppe turns azure, and is clasped
By Caucasus in silvery embrace.

Or these:

Turn again, Whittington!
Oh, Whittington, return again!

I was particularly affected by these last lines even though there was nothing special about them. Obviously because a dirty and passengerless ship flying a British flag once put into the Batum port with freight for the firm 'Sosiphros'. On its side was painted in white the familiar name of *Whittington.*

For some reason I felt sorry for that ship as if it had been a man, rain-sodden and shivering in the cold, a failure. But out there, in old England, somebody was waiting for it, too. A woman's humble heart, the heart old before its time, of an erstwhile beauty was beating nervously in some dim little sea-side town. She was waiting for the return of a silent husband or a son, whose ship was the slow and shy *Whittington.*

Frayerman turned up at the office of the *Mayak* in the simplest way possible.

The newspaper needed the telegrams of the Russian Telegraph Agency (RTA). I was told that I had to go and see the RTA Batum correspondent, Frayerman, and come to an agreement with him.

Frayerman was living in a hotel with the pompous name of The Miramare. The hall was decorated with dark-coloured frescoes of Vesuvius and orange groves in Sicily.

I found Frayerman in a 'martyr to the pen' attitude. He was sitting at a table, clutching his head with his left hand and writing

something with his right, while at the same time wiggling his foot.

I immediately recognized in him the little stranger with the flapping coat tails, who so often dissolved in front of my eyes in some rainy vista of a Batumi street.

He laid aside his pen and looked at me with his kind, laughing eyes. Having got over the business of the RTA telegrams, we immediately started talking about poetry.

I noticed that the bed in the room was standing with its four feet in four basins of water. Apparently, it was the only defence against scorpions which ran all over the hotel and scared the guests.

A stumpy woman wearing a pince-nez came into the room, gave me a suspicious look and shook her head, saying in a very high-pitched voice:

'I have quite enough trouble with one poet, with Ruvim, and now I see he's found himself another poet to play with. A real misfortune, this is.'

It was Frayerman's wife. She threw her hands up in mock dismay, laughed and immediately began frying eggs and sausages on an oil stove.

She did not let me go until we had all had lunch and a sizeable glass of vodka each.

As I drank the vodka I kept marvelling at its extraordinary property: my head remained quite light, but all the thoughts wandering about in it seemed to me as fresh as a young magnolia blossom in a Batumi avenue and as bright, and even perhaps as sticky to the touch, as a newly painted felucca.

It was a wonderful feeling. Frayerman and I went back to the *Mayak* office, swaying slightly and laughing for no reason at all. On the way we met Lucienna and Misha Sinyavsky and dragged them off with us. It was a pity that Babel had by then left for Tiflis, for we would have gone to his house in Cape Zeleny and brought him with us as well. And his wife, too, and Mary and even the poet Chachikov. And we would have founded the first literary association, the first cell of Soviet poetry and prose in that distant outpost of our country.

Misha Sinyavsky got another bottle of vodka. We drank it in the newspaper office and sang songs.

When we had reached the refrain of one of them in came Nirk and took it up with the dash of a true *tamada*.[26]

Nirk was followed into the office by Monomakh who had previously scratched at the door with his paw. He took part in the general gaiety and swallowed bits of sausage with the noise of tight corks being pulled out. Altogether, it was obvious the dog had some experience in such things as festivities.

The general gaiety did not abate even when a dead-drunk, but entirely calm and collected American sailor, nicknamed the Joker, came into the room lured by the promising din. He spat on the floor and, without paying the slightest attention to us, took off his jacket, rolled it into a bolster, put it on the floor in a corner and went to sleep without a word. He slept till the morning and left as silently and quietly as he had come.

Ever since then Frayerman used to call at my office several times a day. Sometimes he stayed for the night.

All the more interesting conversations took place at night. Frayerman told me his life story and I, of course, envied him.

Son of a poor timber broker in Mohilev, Frayerman had thrown himself into the thick of revolution and the life of the people as soon as he was able to escape from his family.

He was blown from one side of the country to the other, from west to east, and only stopped on the shores of the cold sea of Okhotsk.

The Far East was in flames. The Japanese had occupied the Maritime Province. Partisan detachments fought them with blind and merciless courage.

Frayerman joined the unit commanded by the partisan Tryapitsin in the town of Nikolayevsk-on-the-Amur. Its manners and customs were like those of the Klondike.

Frayerman fought the Japanese, went hungry, wandered about the *taiga* with his unit, and his whole body under the seams of his jacket was covered with bloody stripes and scars: mosquitoes could sting only at the seams where they were able to slip their tiny sting into the hole made by the needle.

The Amur was like the sea. The mist rose up from the water in wreaths of smoke. Red Siberian lilies flowered in the spring

around the town. And with them came, unexpected as always, a great and agonizing love for a woman who did not love him in return.

I remember Frayerman's stories making me feel this cruel love as if it were a wound on my own body.

I saw it all: the snow-storms, and the summer by the sea with its smoky air, and the gentle Gilyak children, and the shoals of salmon, and the deer with eyes of surprised girls.

I tried to persuade Frayerman to put it all down in writing. Frayerman did not agree at once, but then wrote with a will. Essentially, in his relations with men and the world, with his acuteness of vision and his ability to see what others completely failed to notice, he was, of course, a writer.

He started writing and finished relatively very quickly a long short story called 'On the Amur'. Later, he changed its name to 'Vaska the Gilyak'. It was published in the magazine *Sibirskiye Ogni* (*Siberian Fires*). Henceforth literature was enriched by yet another young writer, perspicacious and kind.

Now at night we not only talked, but also read Frayerman's short story and corrected the proofs of it.

I liked it: it contained a great deal of that feeling which can be called 'the breath of space' or (rather more accurately) 'the breath of wide open spaces'.

I had felt the yearning for wide open spaces ever since early youth. Instead of abating with the years it became increasingly urgent. The more lands I saw the stronger grew my desire to see yet more countries. Every new horizon still represents for me a vast and great riddle looming in the distance and concealing something new within its blue haze.

Ever since these Batum days our lives – Frayerman's and mine – continued side by side for many years, mutually enriching each other.

In what way did we enrich each other? Evidently, by our curiosity for life, for all that was happening around us, by our acceptance of the world in all its poetic complexity, our love for our land, our country, our people, a very vital, simple love, embedded in our inner conscience and attached to it by thousands of

tiny rootlets. And if the roots of plants can pierce the earth, the soil on which they grow, absorb its moisture, its salts, its weight and its riddles, we, too, could be said to love life in precisely that way. I say 'we', because I am sure that Frayerman's attitude to nature was much like mine.

More and more I felt myself to be a particle of nature, like any tree or blade of grass, and found this feeling both reassuring and soothing.

Sometimes, lying on the grassy bank of some river or lake, I listened to the earth. It was supposed to be dumb, but through the muteness came the faintest of murmurs – a vague hint of a vague sound as of ringing, spinning itself out in a golden thread. It was the trickling of water, deep in the subsoil, winding its way to the lake.

In moments like these I was happy.

16

The Main Direction

There are people who, after chosing their main direction in life, consciously force themselves to reject all other directions as secondary.

But very frequently this main direction emerges out of life itself or rather in the natural course of life of a particular individual, and often does not correspond to what he had imagined it would be.

I remember trying for a long time and with no visible success to adjust my life so that it should follow one main direction – writing. I imagined that I should subordinate to that aim, narrowly and relentlessly and even ascetically, all my strength and all my time without ever deviating for a minute.

Fortunately, this artificial attitude of mine did not last long, and I soon realized that a free, unfettered life, dedicated to the lofty aim of service to mankind was far more important for a writer than a niggling preoccupation with his work. And the books would appear as the inevitable consequence of such a life. Were bound to.

Oh indeed, time was when I wanted to run my life according to a systematic plan, according to a systematic search for a meaning and a content in all I experienced, wanted to make it dependent on an attitude to people predetermined in accordance with their qualities, wanted to reduce everything to logical and precise acts of behaviour.

'Only thus – I assured myself – can one achieve self-improvement and become a real human being within the fellowship of men.'

But however much I strove towards that ideal conduct it slipped away from me, forced out daily by the daily cares. Life took me prisoner. I had great difficulty in resisting its natural course, until one fine Batum morning I gave up the struggle.

It happened the precise morning when Misha Sinyavsky referred to my philosophic dissertations as 'drivel'.

It was a really lovely October morning, with huge dog-rose petals, covered with large drops of dew as with beads, lying, all aflame, on the damp earth near the verandah in Bartskhana where the Sinyavskys were living (I had come to try some of Lucienna's famous grilled red mullet).

The sea shone, a few paces away, white and warm like new milk. The Anatolian shore lay concealed behind a light haze, but the yellowish-red colour of the Turkish mountains could be seen through it.

I was unfolding to Misha my idea about the uselessness of a life which was not subservient to a preconceived aim, and the need for forcing oneself to try and reach it without any deviations.

Misha ate the fish and kept glancing at me through narrow eyes. There was every sign that he was beginning to lose his temper.

'Driveller!' said Misha suddenly, in a calm, determined kind of way.

'Who is a driveller?' I asked. And suddenly a terrible presentiment made my heart miss a beat.

'How do you mean, who? You. You are the driveller. If, of course, one is to believe your wishy-washy philosophy. You've been the first to proclaim it. Just you listen to me, you overgrown schoolboy, don't hang a millstone round your neck. All that blather of yours comes from malaria, probably. You've got the Indian kind and it's given you Yogi microbes. Lead a free and easy life, and the easier the better. And don't try to fit it to that tedious pattern you've thought up. It's all balderdash and about as much use to you as glasses to a blind man. "Trust life" – as the old doffers used to say, the writers, you know – and you'll reach your goal anyway.'

'What goal?'

'Oh, God!' cried Misha. 'Have you changed your mind about

becoming a writer? Don't argue so much, it's not your business, and concentrate on observing and marvelling at things!'

Never yet had Misha spoken so crossly to me.

I took him at his word. I had obviously been wanting to hear someone say these things. The weight which chafed me and with which I had burdened myself of my own free will, disappeared. I suddenly felt the wire-thin smell of a cold cluster of Isabella grapes penetrate to the verandah through the cracks of the window frames and gently tickle my lips. I laughed.

'What is it?' asked Misha nervously.

'Nothing. My lips itch. I haven't shaved for the last three days.'

'That's the first time I hear of lips itching for that reason,' mumbled Misha, giving me a suspicious look. 'Lucie, did you hear what he said?'

'Oh, Kostya!' cried Lucienna (she was just about to finish cooking the red mullet on the grill in the garden). 'You're talking rot and don't mean a word of it. But what the hell! I love you all the same.'

While I was sitting at the Sinyavskys I was all the time aware of the smell of Isabella grapes which sometimes wafted up close to me and sometimes receded into the distance. It irritated me until I went down into the small vineyard at the back of the house and saw the heavy blue clusters in the shadow of the leaves slightly guilded by the sun. They were hanging down from wooden struts and were filled with a violet juice.

I took one bunch and ate it. The sun was pouring down its heat from a clear sky, but I suddenly felt piercingly cold currents streaming through that heat.

It was as if someone were constantly adding icy water to a boiling solution. At last the icy water took over and flooded out the remaining vestiges of warmth, and then a shivering fit overwhelmed me with all the suddenness of an unexpected blow. I went reeling back to the verandah, lay down on the floor on a spot made warm by the sun and groaned blissfully.

'There! That's that!' said Misha in a voice of despair. 'Malaria! His third attack! And Isabella's done it again. Lucie, we must pile whatever warm things we have on him.'

'Won't help,' I muttered. By then I had the feeling I had been gripped in a vice within two mighty blocks of arctic ice, about a mile thick, that I was about to turn into an icicle and that there was no escape for me.

It was thus I succumbed to tropical yellow fever. I had attacks of it every day.

Yellow fever was brought to Batum by Indian troops – sepoys – during the British occupation of Transcaucasus.

I was ill with it for a long time, several years, and only got rid of it in the forests of Central Russia. But ever since those Batum days the very sight of Isabella's mauve grapes or one sip of its rather sharp wine had been enough to provoke an immediate fit of shivers in me.

In the same way I used really to shiver at the memory of the artificial and entirely alien ideas which I had tried to make myself believe in – ideas ridiculed by Misha Sinyavsky.

The last months of my life in Batum were passed in that state of somewhat hazy unreality which is brought about by malaria. At the beginning of an attack when the shivering fit gradually turned into a dry fever, the head functioned with clarity and coolness, and I was too weak to control my imagination. It tore about frantically, like a bird which had flown by mistake into a room, until it lost its strength and fell to the floor with broken wings. Then, at once, silence and darkness reigned and an image, always the same, viscous and clammy, long and tedious, rose up before me every few minutes, right through the night and till the early hours of the morning. I could never catch hold of it. It was a feeling rather than an image. It stretched on and on like a thread of thick syrup. My fingers stuck to it and I was afraid the syrup might get into my mouth and throat and choke me to death.

I would start raving and fighting to free myself from the loathsome syrupy meshes. Nirk would then come from the adjoining room in the middle of the night, put a wet towel on my head and say that I lacked the necessary calories to cope with my illness.

I moaned. Outside, the sea moaned in response, while Nirk sat

at a table rolling cigarettes and whistling the tune of some popular song.

By the morning I was covered with perspiration, my hair was all wet, malaria left me till the evening, and a vast weakness and a feeling of freshness made my body almost weightless.

Now as I think back I remember that the tedious ideas of a purposely rational life had gained possession of me just when I had my first attacks of malaria. The fact that these ideas kept coming back was agony to me. I began to hate them. They seemed to me to have a viscous quality about them, like glue. The glue drew a grey, loathsome film over everything.

I was convinced that no water, salt or fresh, could ever wash off this film and I would ask Nirk to give me a knife to scrape away these foul thoughts.

Soon Nirk's place during those nightly fits of malaria was taken by Frayerman. He also put ice on my head in a bag smelling of rubber, and gave me water to drink.

And by the morning it was all over. All that remained was weakness and palpitations of the heart. All day long I swallowed quinine, just like that, neat, not made up into pills, went deaf and my hands shook.

Frayerman was appalled and brought in doctors and hook-nosed old Adzharian 'medicine men'. They treated me with grey powders and alcohol with the addition of pepper and yolks of egg. The powders made me feel sick. Afterwards I discovered they were made of dried spiders, ground.

I sent away all the old men, continued only the quinine treatment and the malaria began gradually to get better. But for a long time yet everything around me appeared morbidly exaggerated, while colours were either too bright or too dull and cloudy like calf's foot jelly.

17
Thousands of Signal Rockets

Batum continued to amaze me. The city was still, as Sonia Frayerman put it, in the power of 'the vestiges of the cursèd past'. I have already written about some of these vestiges. And now the NEP era[27] began, and whole hordes of 'Nepmen', complete with their golden-haired maidens, moved into Batum which had a tempting 'porto-franco', in other words duty-free trade with foreign countries.

Offices of foreign firms – Sosiphros, John Whittall & Sons, Lloyd Triestino, Paquet and many others, appeared on the quay in every nook and corner, however narrow and dusty. For the most part these were speculative firms.

They sold saccharine, vanilla powder, ladies' garters, flints for cigarette lighters, playing cards, preserves, pressed ginger gone rancid with age, hair-dye, dried up olives and artificial jewellery. They bought up gold and foreign currency, but only under the counter; as a blind they sold dried fruit and handicrafts.

The representatives of these firms were as alike as brothers – independent of nationality. For the most part they were olive-skinned, dark-haired, slick young men. They carried heavy amber rosaries and wore socks of all the colours of the rainbow and patent leather shoes as sharp-nosed as little boats. Their hair, smeared with brilliantine, like black convex mirrors, gave a distorted reflection of the objects around them and particularly of electric bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

Chachikov used to refer to these young men as Levantines and descendants of Phoenicians. They all spoke decent Russian. But

Chachikov preferred speaking to them in a mixed Russo-Greco-Franco-Georgian dialect and even tried to write funny verse in it.

Chachikov had not given up his knightly adoration of Lucienna, and would sometimes obtain lipstick or mascara from the descendants of the Phoenicians and chivalrously present these to Lucienna.

After trying out all these alluring things Lucienna would frankly scream that it was infamous imitation and real muck. But Chachikov was not shocked by these words.

Lucienna never minced her words. We were used to this. We all, including the shabbily elegant Chachikov, thought she expressed herself like a young duchess or a prima donna of the Imperial theatres.

Once, Chachikov brought to the *Mayak* office and then to Bartskhana, the local poetess Flora. That nice, tall, pale girl bent like a reed as she walked and declaimed poems, faintly reminiscent of Anna Akhmatova's.

Flora belonged to the kind of poetess who goes into unrestrained rapture over poetry. As she listened to new poems by Gumilev, Bryusov or Bagritsky she would fold her hands as in prayer and little drops of tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. Furtively, she would wipe them away.

She lived with her mother – a school teacher. Virginity surrounded her with a halo, smelling of violets made by the scent firm Xidias & Co. (Athens).

At first Flora was nervous of Lucienna, but soon they became friends and made riotous fun of us and of another nice man who had strayed in, as he expressed it, and joined us by accident.

It was the journalist Volodya Mrozovsky who worked for the republican newspaper *Trudovoy Batum*. The tactfulness of this kind and hesitant man eclipsed even Frayerman's. Mrozovsky had the rare capacity of being sincerely enthusiastic about second-rate things – those that are close to the genuine ones and resemble them.

Thus, for example, he was passionately interested in draughts rather than chess, in the puppet rather than the real theatre, in cutting lithographic reproductions out of magazines rather than in paintings, and also in everything that was published in magazines

in the section entitled 'Miscellany' – rebuses, anagrams, acrostics, drawings of mazes, crosswords and picture puzzles.

He used to collect these picture puzzles. They might represent, for instance, a herd of elephants in the jungle, with, under the elephants, a caption in the form of a question calculated to arouse the reader's curiosity: 'Where is our beauty?'

You had to turn the picture in all directions until you happened to notice the figure of a girl outlined by three elephant legs, an elephant's trunk and a tree branch, with the girl fleeing into the jungle on high and slender heels.

Volodya Mrozovsky had a whole album of these pictures cut out of magazines.

In spite of all this, Volodya was a pleasant man, silent and obliging.

Adzharia was celebrating the anniversary of the October Revolution for the first time. To mark the occasion Mrozovsky invited us all to a little banquet in his place.

Mrozovsky lived with his mother.

We assembled in his dark old flat, cluttered up, like a furniture shop, with heavy things made of dark oak – chests of drawers, sideboards, armchairs and cupboards.

Mrozovsky's banquet was of a Georgian kind with all sorts of herbs – tarragon, *kinza*, mint – with lavash and *churek* pastries, piquant sauces *chokhokhbili* and satsivi, fried *suluguni* cheese, little *grazy* – vine leaves stuffed with rice and meat – red Kakhetian wine and kebbab which we rolled in cinnamon powder.

Lucienna could not do without singing. She always sang. She knew an incredible number of Odessa, Kharkov, Nikolayev and Rostov songs. Her rollicking voice suddenly and unexpectedly drowned the general conversation and even frightened such peaceful people as Mrozovsky and Flora.

It made everyone start, when in the middle of a conversation about chess or about the Tiflis poets from 'The Ship of the Argonauts' café, one of her songs would suddenly burst like a fire cracker out of the Bartskhana yard where Lucienna was washing up or frying something.

At Mrozovsky's party, because we were in Georgia, Lucienna decided to make full use of her Caucasian repertory.

No sooner did she begin to sing the song about the brave if unfortunate Khaz-Bulat, than a mighty drunken chorus unexpectedly broke in from outside in support of Lucienna:

You are grey haired and old,
She is too good for you!

We rushed to the windows. A crowd of drunks with their arms round each other's necks was sitting on the pavement by the house. They swayed about and with their eyes popping out of their heads painstakingly yelled out the song started by Lucienna.

Thereupon Lucienna began to sing:

'The town of Nikolayev and the French factoree. . . .'

But the choir from the street below was in no wise at a loss and answered back with a will:

And I am a young fellow who's only twenty-three.

'Right!' cried Lucienna. 'I'll sing them something they won't be able to follow!

She started singing the lyrical, slow love song by Tchaikovsky, quite unusual for her:

Not a word, oh my friend, not a sigh. . . .

But, unbelievably, the drunken choir immediately took up the text and sang the next line with a sort of sinister power:

We sha-a-ll not break our silence, you and I. . . .

Lucienna's blood was up. She was determined to out-sing the Georgians. But they refused to give up, kept drowning Lucienna's voice with their own singing and now and then drank to her health out of bottles which they took out of their pockets and clinked together with such force that gentle Flora let out a cry every time.

Only Mrozovsky's old mother remained entirely unperturbed. She had grown up in Batum and there was nothing in the world could surprise her.

Lucienna got tired and was just about to give up, when something happened which quite changed the tenor of our little dinner party.

Something incomprehensible whizzed with a terrific hissing noise past our window and along the street. Then it exploded, lit up everything around with a dead white light and went out.

It looked like a rocket sent off along the street rather than up into the air. And that is exactly what it turned out to be.

The drunks outside screamed madly and rushed, pushing and shoving into the courtyard. Immediately afterwards a second rocket hissed past along the street, struck an advertisement pillar and broke into a shower of sparks. There was a smell of singed cloth. The drunks yelled even louder.

We were all excited. Only old Mrs Mrozovsky said imperturbably:

'Every year without fail they play some kind of trick.'

'Who is "they"?' I asked.

'The Batumis. It was they, of course, who thought of sending rockets off along the streets rather than up in the air.'

Sinyavsky said it was not a bad idea. Frayerman was simply delighted. Sonia Frayerman was not with us: she liked going about everywhere alone.

We decided to try out the experience of being shot at by rockets, to go and visit the Sinyavskys in Bartskhana and stay there till the morning.

But when we came out the rockets were no longer whizzing through the streets. Someone had at last put a stop to this extraordinary entertainment.

Batum resounded with the sound of flags flapping in the wind. Nearly half the flags were Turkish. The citizens had not yet had time to make new Soviet flags.

Bands composed of pipers and drummers played as they walked slowly along the streets. The musicians were almost all without exception short, fat, bewhiskered and with noses as blue as plums. The best part of their lives they obviously spent in dukhans.

When we reached the port individual rockets were still swooping

up into the autumn sky. Then we suddenly heard a sound like mortar firing. It came from the direction of the mountains.

This was followed by the hissing of hundreds of rockets. Up into the sky rose their smoky, yellowish tails. All of a sudden, the whole sky exploded in a blinding blaze and the sparkle of countless white stars.

Their light had hardly time to go out before new multitudes of rockets flew up and halted for an instant in the sky.

A harsh magnesium light flooded the city, the port, the bazaars, the parks, the ships at the piers and the sea, suddenly becalmed.

Batum was ablaze with a snowy fire. There was a smell of gun powder in the air. The glow of the fireworks must have been visible to people in Anatolia and for many miles out to sea.

We met Nirk. He told us that the flood-lighting of the city would last two nights. In the course of these two nights thousands of rockets would be let off.

The reason was this: during the first world war a large stock of military rockets was kept in the old Batum fortress. The latest date up to which the rockets could safely be stored was approaching. To keep them after that date was dangerous: the rockets could explode as a result of auto-combustion. The commandant had therefore decided to discharge all surplus rockets into the sky. Very opportunely, a public holiday was about to be celebrated.

The following day Nirk told us that the ships approaching Batum that night had sent radio messages requesting information about what was happening in Batum and inquiring whether they could enter the port and whether the strange light display visible over the horizon at Batum presented any danger for ships. Two or three ships changed course and sailed away to Poti without waiting for an answer.

But apart from this fabulous illumination when a dome of living fire kept pulsating without interruption over the horizon, Batum was quite capable of frightening unsuspecting people with the frantic noise of its inhabitants.

There was nothing surprising about that. Not everyone has the luck of witnessing a sight such as this in his lifetime. Hence all the sonic resources of the population (to coin a phrase) were

exhausted (temporarily, of course) during the very first night of the illuminations.

By sonic resources of the population I mean, firstly and foremostly, the frantic yells and whistling of street boys, then the roars of laughter, the cat-calls, the drone of sazandaris, the crackling of rattles, the crackling of chestnuts on braziers, the ringing of guitars and the competitive singing of songs – and all the other thousands of sounds that can be heard during a public festival in a sea-side town.

As we approached the suburbs, the sounds changed and became quieter and more melodious. Choir singing, albeit muffled, muted in a way, reached us from the houses around us. What appealed to us most was that the singing came not only from houses, but even from the decks of ships.

We stood for a long time near one particular ship trying to make out the language in which the sailors were singing.

Beyond the bridge over a gurgling, fast-running stream, the port came to an end. The city continued to sparkle with the lights flying upwards into the sky, but by the time it reached Bartskhana, the noise had become faint, like the boom of distant breakers. Flashes of rockets outlined the dark outline of the mountains. And there, in the mountains, quietly whimpered the jackals, frightened by the light they could not explain. They were too cowardly to howl loud and strong, as they obviously wanted to, and merely whimpered.

In Bartskhana we sat out on the verandah and drank *madjarka*. The noise of the festivities reached us from afar. It sounded like a waterfall.

I have always liked the rumble of festivities and public gatherings softened by distance. This distant rumble makes it easy to think. And not just to think, but also to imagine all the incidents an events – those that have already happened and those that have not yet – of the fabulous nocturnal entertainment, to take part, in imagination, in Venetian carnivals or in the festival described by the writer Alexander Grin in his novel *Running on the Waves*.

I was convinced that such festivals prolonged men's lives and kept us ensnared in the coils of life. They seduce us with their

whispered calls from the sea where the still dawn burns like a turquoise streak.

Fires flare up and die, like falling stars. In the darkness you suddenly feel the fantom-like touch of flaming lips and hear the languid weeping of old violins – some wizard has given them the name of *viola d'amore*.

Always, within the core of every real festival (and it is real when it is the expression of that rare thing – a heart both light and full), lies hidden a romantic or heroic story or sometimes both together. And more often than not – love.

We sat on the verandah, and as always, the madjarka wine wove our thoughts into strange patterns. For example, I suggested, why had no one up till now written the history not of all the blood spilt in this world, but of festivals beginning with the summer festival of Paris and ending with the birthday party of a little boy who had just been given a clay whistle.

There are many festivals – from sea festivals, when the foam in the wake of ships reflects the lights on shore and the nights are heavy with the smell of orange blossom, to celebrations in honour of writers, artists and poets who have sown fruitful doubt in the hearts of men.

Even Misha Sinyavsky became romantic and said that it would not be a bad idea if there were a festival in honour of the divine palaces of the architect Palladio. But this was exaggerating it a bit.

Only the dawn – misty and quiet – put an end to the explosion of rockets. I went to sleep, sitting on the floor, with my head on the low sofa, and heard through my sleep the cool, iodine-charged breeze wander freely on the verandah and rustle papers as if looking for something.

18
A Bleak Winter

Days of storm have their own colour. There is no doubt about that. There are all kinds of storms – muddy-green, yellow like clay, grey and almost black. The coming of winter brought green storms to Batum. The air became the colour of pickled cabbage, but muddy. The sea, too, appeared muddy. Only at the actual shore could it be seen that the water, in fact, was surprisingly limpid and appeared grey only because of the dull skies.

The storms rapidly gained strength and seethed along the whole coast. Their roar never ceased either day or night. The waves swelled far from the shore and rose like droves of horses with long, white manes. They stampeded to the beach, their manes streaming in the wind, and suddenly dived leaving a little frothy trace behind them on the surface of the water.

Ships sailed with interruptions. Only the lighthouse kept blinking, rather haphazardly, as if it did not much believe that someone might need its patient light.

For days on end the sea vanished behind a screen of rain. Snow fell in the mountains. Visibility, as sailors put it, fell to almost nil. This gave the city a certain air of cosiness. Space seemed to have contracted and to have encompassed Batum in a tight ring of fog.

Batum shrank. Its streets ended in mist. Only the sharp smell of tropical plants and damp earth bore witness to the fact that somewhere behind that impenetrable curtain, somewhere quite near, was hiding the friendly world of a southern avenue with its last fading cannas.

To my mind, these winters were Batum's best season of the year. All you needed was a raincoat and a pair of stout boots.

Nirk helped me to get the necessary equipment. From then on I went almost every day under the rain to Bartskhana to visit the Sinyavskys.

My shy little paper, the *Mayak* (for some reason I thought of it as shy) now appeared once, instead of four times, a week: neither the Batumi nor the Odessa Seamen's Union had enough money. There was almost no work. My quiet little compositor 'Sleepy' really did spend most of the day dozing. The rain's ceaseless rumble sent him to sleep.

It would have been impossible to think of a more soporific sound. Sleep would creep in, warm, viscous, smelling of dripping wet carnations in the front garden outside our tiny, sooty printing room (it was an old, ramshackle printing room where in the old days they used to print visiting cards).

The warm air from the sea also brought with it a sort of debilitating torpor.

And so, to escape the somnolence which was hanging in the air, I would put on my raincoat and go off to Bartskhana. On the way there I would stop and have a meal at the harbour dukhan, 'Poor Misha'.

A picture of a fat man with cheeks puffed out like a trumpeter's was painted on one window of the dukhan. The portrait had a caption, which ran: 'Our poor Misha after eating in this dukhan.' It was said that only a short time before, another window had the picture of the self-same Misha, but starving and weedy, before he had eaten in the dukhan.

But the glass had been broken by British sailors during a fight, and since then there was only one Misha – the one who had had his meal.

The dukhan was divided by a glass partition into two small rooms. Next to the kitchen was the room for *giaours*,[28] and behind it the room for Moslems with separate, direct access to the kitchen.

There was a purpose in this lay-out. No pork or wine was served in the room for Moslems and the waiter carrying the sinful food could not get into it even by chance.

I ate *kharcho*. It gave out a red, peppery steam. The clients wrote down with their fingers on steamed up windows the amounts they owed to the dukhan-keeper. Sparrows managed to slip through into the dukhan whenever the clients came in or out, and made drumming noises on the floor and the empty tables as they hurriedly picked up the crumbs. They even fought sometimes at the risk of being expelled from the dukhan.

The clients sat with one leg tucked under. They always took their shoes off in the dukhan, leaving their thick woollen socks on. But as soon as a stranger came in, the clients all hastily put on their shoes. It was considered bad manners to sit in one's socks in the presence of a stranger.

I washed down the kebbab with red wine. It was slightly redolent of the wine-skin which had contained it, but it made me feel warm. I slowly sipped the wine, slowly rolled my cigarette, slowly smoked it, and a slow torpor gradually overpowered me and held out the promise of an occupation useless at first sight, but active and yet motionless.

If I were to use an old-fashioned, but fairly accurate expression, I could call this occupation the 'Memories game'. It consisted in my sitting back and surrendering myself to my memories – not of past events and not of people, but only of the places I had visited and loved and of my favourite poems.

Only of that.

It was an inoffensive and even an instructive occupation.

It was instructive in the sense that I tried to recall the whole of my life episodically and as if I were standing on the sidelines, judging it, inevitably, in the light of the present day, and doing my best to avoid the repetition of past errors. Only rarely did I achieve my aim, but it gave me the conviction that I was not living anyhow, not at the whim of chance, but was ruler of my own fate. Even the frequent and bitter disappointments which this conviction had to suffer could not make me abandon it.

I considered it to be – as Nirk expressed it – the guiding point of my life's compass.

19
The Porter

In the dukhan I usually sat at a wide window which looked out on to the oil-polluted water with rotten piles driven into it.

If the air became too stuffy I opened the window. The smell of oil and of the dirty but cool water filled the dukhan and the freshness dried sweaty foreheads.

Most of the dukhan's patrons were *mushas* – porters. The owner of the dukhan had been a musha in his youth, then somehow had made money, but still kept a soft spot for his tribe of mushas and fed them at discount prices and on credit.

All the mushas hung around the port practically twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four. They waited for a chance to get an occasional job. But there were few jobs. Not enough even for half the total number of Batumi mushas, and therefore the mushas mostly slept, with their backs against the tin walls of the port warehouses. They all slept in an almost identical posture: their knees raised and their long, sinewy arms hanging down between their knees, so that their hands almost touched the ground. It was the deep sleep of tired and hungry men.

I was always particularly struck with the mushas' hands. The swollen veins were tied in knots like the roots of an oak. The blood in these veins showed dark through the grey skin. It pulsated in jerks and seemed ready to stop at any instant. Then the musha, of course, would not wake up. This, in fact, is what sometimes happened.

The dukhan was always full of people. When a customer came in the mushas immediately let him have a table for himself and dropped their voices.

The mushas ate little and slowly. It was obvious that for them food represented a long awaited rest.

The mushas carried huge loads. Once I saw a short little musha, blue in the face with the effort, carry a grand piano on his back all by himself, hardly bending his knees.

The endurance of these men – Adzhar peasants for the most part – was amazing. And their gentleness, too. Gentler, milder, more trusting people I don't think I have ever seen in my life.

They were constantly cheated. They had no union. They were pushed around by anyone and everyone.

I often tried to talk to the mushas, but they only smiled in reply. The whole fatalism of Moslems seemed to be concentrated in these men and they were weighed down with it. The only thing they ever allowed themselves was a deep sigh, when the load was thrown off and with the back of the hand they wiped the bitter sweat off their exhausted faces which resembled cracked and burnt clay.

They never counted the money, and shoved it, without giving it a glance, into the pockets of their wide, dusty trousers, tied at the ankles. This was not done for effect – it was simply that the mushas trusted people. And if people deceived them, they merely lamented not the loss of their earnings, but the existence on the earth of bad men who deceived others. Every time it was a surprise to them.

For slaving away in this way the mushas received a pittance.

Once I saw an old musha sitting by a wall weeping, shielding his eyes with his sleeve. An old woman, as dried up as he was, was standing in front of him and was scolding him loudly and angrily.

The old man made no reply and continued to weep. Passers-by shrugged their shoulders, but some of them stopped, looked at the musha and sadly shook their heads.

Then the old woman looked around helplessly, shrugged her shoulders and ambled off along the bazaar street. She stumbled and whispered to herself.

A middle-aged musha came up to the old musha. He was carrying a box of plates and cups. He carefully put down the box and tapped the old musha lightly on the shoulder. The old man got up with difficulty like a broken-winded horse. His legs shook. The middle-aged musha placed the boxes on the old musha's 'hump', took out a Turkish lira, gave it to the old man and stood for a

long time watching him as he carried the boxes to the railway station.

I realized that the middle-aged musha simply handed over to the old man the money which he had been given in advance for his job. No one but me seemed to have noticed this, and the middle-aged musha smiled guiltily and said:

'He is old enough to be my father.'

While I sat with the mushas in the dukhan it occurred to me that in order to end their poverty and a situation in which they were deprived of all rights, the mushas should be brought together and united. But I did not know how to begin. I, therefore, decided to seek the advice of Nirk who was an experienced trade union worker.

Nirk looked at me for a long time with narrow, laughing eyes, then pushed his smart naval cap to the back of his head, pulled it forward again over his nose and said:

'A fruitful idea. Particularly in the climate of a sub-tropical coast. All right then, let's weigh anchor! I shall assume total responsibility. You are a lyrical poet, a minstrel, as they say and this is not your kind of business.'

Nirk thought for a little and added without any apparent connection with the preceding words.

'Quite right. In present conditions they are just the people to be – and they will be – the prop of the proletarian revolution.'

Unfortunately, I was unable to follow Nirk's vigorous efforts to create a musha union. Once again I was overwhelmed by malaria. All the same we had time, Nirk and I, to organize the first conference of mushas and, before that, to publish an appeal to the mushas in the *Mayak*.

We held the conference in the tin building of one of the port warehouses. The doors of corrugated iron were wide open. The mushas carefully swept the warehouse and hung up a portrait of Lenin, and one musha, a shy old man, decorated the portrait with woollen threads of various colours tied into complicated knots. I have seen old Kurdish women weave patterns such as these.

A few old porters were sitting somewhat apart. At one time they

used to boss it over the others, but now they felt small and were sitting quietly.

Nirk made a business-like speech, but his eyes laughed.

After him spoke the oldest and the most respected of the mushas. He did not speak, he shouted, shook a lean, brown fist at someone, suddenly stopped and went out hurriedly wiping his tears with a torn cap.

There was general silence, but the old man came back at once, a childlike smile beaming on his face, came up to Nirk, embraced him and pressed Nirk's head to his shoulder.

The mushas swayed and rose to their feet. There was a confused murmur. 'He remembered his son,' the mushas were saying in a low voice. 'He had a son, the handsomest lad on the whole Black Sea Coast.'

The old man shouted something, seized the two nearest mushas by their shoulders and began a slow, heavy dance, swaying from side to side.

Immediately, all the mushas seized each other by the shoulders, broke into song, and like the old man, began dancing a slow dance. It was, as I thought then, 'the dance of tired mushas'. It could not be called by any other name. By then a crowd had gathered outside and the applause beat a slow rhythm to the dance, like the sound of castanets.

Afterwards the mushas went about as if drunk.

Thus was set up the Union of Mushas, which soon became the Transport Workers' Union.

I was treated with laundry blue. Every night I felt I was dying, by the morning I was too weak to speak and waited, with horror, for the afternoon when at precisely three o'clock I began to ache all over – the sign of an approaching fever.

The Kurdish shoeblack gave me what he considered to be the most powerful remedy against malaria – a dried spider sealed in the empty shell of a walnut. But even this miracle cure failed to help.

The port doctor said that I should immediately, without wasting a day, leave Batum for Tiflis, where, according to him, my malaria should get better at once.

A few days later I handed over the *Mayak* to Mrozovsky and left for Tiflis together with Frayerman.

During my last three months in Batum, apart from editing the *Mayak* I was also responsible for the printing of the Adzhar republic paper *Trudovoy Batum* (*Toiling Batum*).

I should not like to leave Batum in this narrative, without telling my readers about the time when I unexpectedly became the friend and pupil of the then famous circus wrestler Dovgello, former champion of Russia in French wrestling.

It so happened that the wrestler Steinbach (champion of Bavaria) had turned him over on the mat in an unfortunate manner, and broke his arm. Since then Dovgello could no longer wrestle and went back to his old profession: before working in a circus Dovgello had been a type-setter and a maker-up.

We met in the printing works where *Trudovoy Batum* was being printed.

20

Wrestler Dovgello

The maker-up Dovgello seemed patience personified.

He had his own philosophy of life. It came down to this: man is composed of a multitude of weaknesses but these must be treated with indulgence. In fact, he was a firm follower of the Gospel saying: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.'

Besides, most human actions Dovgello regarded as whims. Sometimes these whims were simply inexplicable. On those occasions Dovgello would scratch himself for a long time behind the ear with a composing stick – the indispensable tool of a maker-up – till he finally drew blood, and keep an embarrassed silence.

One such inexplicable whim, for example, was the editor's way of writing leading articles. He wrote them so skilfully that any paragraph could be inserted anywhere: the end in the middle, the middle in the beginning, and the beginning at the end. Or the other way about.

This made no difference to the editor's sequence of ideas and the pale sense of his prose remained inviolate.

Hence setting his articles was akin to solving a problem with several unknowns. Even our proof-reader Semyon Akopovich – the most erudite man in Batum – trying to make out with his short-sighted eyes the proofs of a leading article, would turn to me in despair and say:

'Print it any way you like. I decline all responsibility for this arthropodic article. Such articles breed by gemmation. You can

make a hundred out of one. You have merely to transpose the sentences. Let's assume the article contains forty-five sentences. This means that by transposing them we could get over two thousand articles!'

But the editor apparently had a clear memory of the order of the paragraphs in his articles and had tearful rows with us every time.

Semyon Akopovich belonged to the type of proof-reader who is also a philosopher. He knew all the laws of the proof-reading business. In his free time he set up these slogan-like laws in type and hung them up on the walls of his cubby-hole.

The main slogan – 'Noise is the worst enemy of proof-reading!' – was set up in poster-size letters with four menacing exclamation marks standing in a row on either side.

A narrow slip of paper was pasted on the door underneath the slogan. It bore the inscription:

'Do not ask the proof-reader any useless and irrelevant questions during work. You need not even greet him – he will not take offence – for you will merely help him thereby.'

And inside his cubby-hole Semyon Akopovich had hung up two cast-iron warnings:

'Every type-setter makes his own mistakes' and 'No type-setter can set type without making mistakes.'

This last saying raised a storm of indignation among the young compositors. The old compositors merely chuckled: they knew by experience that Semyon Akopovich was right.

And indeed, the outburst did not last for more than half an hour. It died down when Semyon Akopovich was handed the first galley proof carefully set up by the best young compositor. More in sorrow than in triumph Semyon Akopovich found in it three serious mistakes.

On those of us who collaborated on the literary side the greatest impression was produced by Semyon Akopovich's unobjectionable if unexpected broadsheet addressed 'to all writers and authors'.

'Write legibly and as briefly as possible. Do not forget that in order to read even a short book of forty pages the proof-reader's eyes make a journey of over a kilometre along the paper.'

This broadsheet threw us writers into a sweat. We all tried to write legibly and briefly, but were not always successful. So far as I am concerned I never learnt to write legibly. But, on the other hand, I took to writing much more briefly than before.

After the articles had been set up, Semyon Akopovich, Dovgello and I drank tea sitting at a table littered with galleys. Semyon Akopovich would take glossy, crinkly bubliks, sprinkled with poppy seed, out of the pocket of his old coat. It was the occasion to speak of literature and politics, of proof-reading and of various etymological dictionaries. In the course of it Semyon Akopovich would argue endlessly with me about the spelling of certain words. A world conference of linguists would have failed to get the better of him in an argument.

One of Semyon Akopovich's quirks was that, contrary to all proof-readers, he refused to recognize the authority of Dahl's dictionary.[29] He considered that Dahl allowed too much licence in so far as the Russian language was concerned, put too much emphasis on local dialects and sometimes gave a wrong interpretation of words.

'However,' Semyon Akopovich would say 'I forgive him everything because he spent nights on end at the bedside of the dying Pushkin.'

Whenever I said that I read Dahl's dictionary like a novel, a marvellous monument to popular poetry and popular wit, a lively encyclopaedia of Russian life, Semyon Akopovich would smile an indulgent smile and emphatically shrug his bony shoulders.

At the beginning of this chapter I wrote that Dovgello was good nature personified. However, to abuse his good nature was a risky thing to do and sometimes even dangerous to life and limb. I discovered this soon enough.

Dovgello had his own type-setting case. He usually set the type for advertisements or time-tables of sea cruises, and, therefore, apart from fancy kinds of type his case also contained small stereotype blocks. Dovgello used them for advertisements as a rule either when the customer demanded it or when he liked the advertisement himself.

For time-tables of sea cruises Dovgello used an old half-worn block. It represented an ancient paddle steamer with masts and lots of rigging.

Because of NEP, or rather on the eve of NEP, local beauty parlours and private workshops making corsets, bodices and ladies' hats sprang up all over Batum.

For the advertisements of these things Dovgello would use a block which represented the head of a pretty young girl with her hair loose over her shoulders. He would do so cheerfully scratching himself behind the ear with his composing stick. The compositors would wink at each other, but carefully so that Dovgello would not notice.

Semyon Akopovich told me with an air of mystery that Dovgello's wife, a former Polish countess or princess – Potocka or, perhaps, Komarowska – made bodices. This seemed to the compositors to be the reason why Dovgello was apt to embellish this type of advertisement with little vignettes.

According to Semyon Akopovich Dovgello's wife was a good-looking and ambitious lady, by now a little shabby and with a difficult temperament. She ordered her husband about as if he were a little boy. In her presence, Dovgello looked embarrassed, lost his power of speech and became as meek as a rabbit.

Ordinarily, Dovgello's meekness failed him only if he was driven to despair. Then he became as dangerous as a mad buffalo.

Opposite Dovgello at his case sat the young compositor Niko – fond of jokes, hoaxes and bluffs, but not a very good type-setter. There were occasions when Dovgello would get angry and make Niko set his type all over again. Niko would feel very hurt and think up ways and means of getting his own back.

At last Niko had an inspiration and devised what he imagined in the heat of the moment to be an ingenious and subtle revenge. He remained behind in the printing shop on some pretext after everyone had left and threw bits of bread and old stone-hard cheese into all the compartments of Dovgello's case.

There were many rats in the printing shop – more than in the hold of an ocean tramp.

The rats would run about the floor without undue haste even

in the daytime. Dovgello would kill the rats almost without fail by throwing lead quads at them.

Niko was right: a swarm of rats, squealing and fighting, rushed into Dovgello's type-setting case and rummaged through all the letters in the case as they devoured the bread and cheese. A lot of time had to be spent to restore some order in the case.

The following day I visited the printing shop for some reason and the subsequent events took place under my very eyes.

Dovgello gazed at his desecrated case with all its confusion for a long time, in silence and keeping utterly calm. Niko kept winking at the other compositors and enjoyed himself. He felt quite safe. The rats had not left a single crumb of bread or cheese and the maker-up man had no incriminating evidence. He could not guess, of course, which of the compositors had played this trick.

But the longer Dovgello kept silent scratching himself behind the ear with his composing stick, the more nervous did Niko become.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Dovgello stretched out his long, gorilla-like arms, seized Niko and quite calmly carried him on his outstretched arms to the wide-open window. The printing shop occupied the first floor of the building. The windows looked out on to the court-yard.

Niko was struck numb with terror. He did not even attempt to tear himself away. He hung in Dovgello's arms like a dead kitten.

Deepest silence reigned in the printing shop.

Dovgello carefully stretched his arms, which were gripping Niko, out of the window, unclasped his fingers and Niko fell with a cry from the first floor on to a heap of sand underneath the window. The sand was kept there in case of fire.

Dovgello wiped his hands, went back to his case and said:

'I warn you! All of you! Next time I hit anyone there'll be nothing left of him!'

One of the compositors sniggered. Dovgello turned in his direction, and slowly, his arms dangling and his fists clenched, moved towards the cheerful compositor.

The compositor jumped away and made for the door. The rest followed him in a rush, pushing and shoving. They rolled crashing

down the stairs into the court-yard, looked around and ran for the gates. The printing shop was overwhelmed with panic.

For three days afterwards Niko pretended to limp. He was pale and careful. Dovgello, on the other hand, as good natured as ever, imposed the head of the pretty woman with a diamond on her breast on the advertisement for a new bust developer. Thin lines radiated from the diamond; according to Dovgello they represented the glitter of diamond rays.

21

A Longing for Samovar Smoke

Batum for me was a 'transit camp'. I had no intention of staying in Batum. I had no firm roots in that city.

Increasingly, I longed for Moscow, for the sound of the damp forest leaves, for the limpid streams which flow through these forests, but frequently stop to form pools and think. On their surface float swarms of yellow water lilies, modest little clouds and the reflections of pine trees, with their crowns upside down.

I often thought of how, on the way to Moscow the train would certainly halt somewhere at a deserted siding in the wood, I should jump out, and in the coarse sand of the embankment, close to a rail and almost nestling up to it, I should see the fibrous stem of a plantain with its little scaly broom of mauve-coloured flowers. It would be standing in the shelter of the hot, high rail as in a hothouse.

The silver edge of a white cloud would be bulging over the end of the forest. The faint, slow sound of thunder would be reaching us from there.

It would be difficult to make out whether it was the noise of a goods train somewhere far beyond the forest or of thunder, unsteady as yet, trying out its voice.

These simple and artless pictures took my breath away whenever they arose in my imagination. For one summer day in the North I was ready to give away the melting foam of all Batumi tides, the picturesque azure blue of all the waves and horizons and all the pink and mysterious dusk of Asia Minor. There Pergamum had stood a long time ago and sculptors had carved the statues of

queens out of warm stone which seemed covered by the tan of the sea.

Almost forty years later I saw the most beautiful, the gentlest of all sculptured heads, the head of Nefertiti whose divine femininity pierces the heart. I could scarcely restrain myself from immediately writing a whole rapturous chapter about her.

But then I was ready to exchange the roar of breakers on the shore for the squeak of the water trickling through the rotten planks of a mill-dam somewhere in Kostroma, and splashing on tall ferns growing near by.

As time went on my longing for the North, for the country of my birth, became more and more febrile, more and more hopeless. For I had only just enough money 'for living' as the saying goes and had to possess my soul in patience till I saved enough for a ticket to Moscow. And it was quite a large sum in those days.

Worry and a longing which felt like a smarting pain, grew and grew and suddenly I realised that this was happening because I had no one with whom I could so much as speak about the North, no one with whom I could exchange memories of it.

I was surrounded by southerners. All my Batumi friends came from the South. None of them, with the exception of Frayerman, had ever lived north of Odessa. To speak to them of the artless landscape of central Russia so dear to my heart was useless. They did not know it and their ideas of it were based solely on the rather colourless lithographs of pictures by Levitan, Nesterov, Ostroukhov or Zhukovsky which gathered dust in the fat old picture-card albums in stationers' shops.

The subject of the talks Frayerman and I had together – endless talks lasting frequently the whole night long – underwent a change. We spoke less of poetry and a great deal of Russian landscape. I talked of the Bryansk forests such as I remembered them in childhood, and Frayerman spoke of the forests of Byelorussia.

I borrowed from Chachikov a slim volume of Yazykov's poetry. The small thin pages, yellow with age, smelled of mould and magnolia, and someone – an old man evidently – had marked with his nail his favourite lines. At that time I was ignorant of

Yazykov and at first blush was struck by him no less then I had been by Pushkin.

I copied the description of a sultry summer's day out of his poem 'Trigorskoye' and learned it off by heart.

Many years later I happened to be in Trigorskoye in the course of a sultry July and felt with extraordinary precision and delight all that was described in that poem.

I read the poem to Frayerman and together we grew ecstatic about it. And it was then, perhaps, in the course of those autumn Batumi days, to the accompaniment of the ceaseless sound of the rain beating upon the tough palm leaves that I first thought of life in the forest, in a village house, with elm branches peeping into windows and the smell of samovar smoke coming in from the yard in the dusk.

This life was realized later in the Meshchery area, which became the second country of my birth.

Spurred on by this longing, Frayerman and I decided to go and live in Tiflis. From there, we thought, it would be easier for us to return to Moscow. Sonia Frayerman preceded us to Tiflis to make the necessary arrangements for our life there.

22

New Year's Eve

I waited for our departure with impatience. I was convinced that in Tiflis the change of climate would cure my malaria.

But our departure was preceded by a number of typical if not very significant events.

It might be worth while describing just one of them – our New (1923) Year's Eve Party, which had an anecdotal flavour about it.

We always wonder at the mysterious and sudden appearance of anecdotes. Their authors are unknown. They exist, of course, but no one has ever seen them or heard them or known them. In their lack of 'personality', they are like that well-known Lieutenant Kizhé.[30]

An anecdote illustrating any and every occasion is born of its own accord.

But apart from anecdotes there are so-called anecdotal events, in other words events which are improbable, funny and absurd. The celebration of the New – 1923 – Year in Batum was just such an anecdotal event; both improbable and absurd all at once.

At that time people were allowed to walk about the streets of Batum without a permit only up to twelve o'clock midnight. We went home from the printing office of the *Trudovoy Batum* always at night and almost every time we were stopped by a patrol of Georgian soldiers of the so-called 'People's' (Menshevik) army.

Most of these soldiers spoke only Georgian, with only two intelligible words: '*dokumenti*!' and '*komendanti*!' We wasted a lot of time arguing with these hot-tempered and zealous youths. We were only saved by the unnatural calm of Dovgello.

The Batum commandant at the time was a handsome colonel with exaggeratedly good manners, whom we had inherited from that very same Menshevik army.

I do not remember the colonel's name. For the sake of convenience let us call him Kurdia.

The colonel was distinguished by a powerful voice. The power of that voice served as a basis for the defence of Batum against the Turks when they started their offensive against Transcaucasus at the time of the Menshevik administration and came right up to the city 'walls'.

Kurdia was in charge of the defence of Batum. In total disregard of the telephone and other means of military communication, and inspired, perhaps, by the knightly warfare of mediaeval times, he commanded his troops from the watch tower of the Batum fire brigade. He stood there with all his glittering staff around him, surrounded by his wasp-waisted A.D.C.s, and peered at the streets through field-glasses in an attempt to catch sight of the enemy.

Orderlies on snorting, sweating steeds would constantly gallop up. They would cup their hands to their mouths to give a loudspeaker effect, trying at the same time to restrain their prancing steeds, and, throwing back their heads, would yell out to Kurdia the latest report from the field of battle.

Kurdia, willingly and without delay, yelled back to them the orders he had to give them.

Batum listened to the frantic clatter of hooves. The more frequently it could be heard and the less frequently came the sound of rifle fire from the city's outskirts, the more obvious it became to the inhabitants of Batum that the war was going badly.

Kurdia's eccentric way of exercising his command from the top of a fire-brigade's watch-tower failed to save the city. Kurdia hastily left the tower and Batum itself and retired beyond the range of Turkish fire.

Well now, that same Kurdia had an announcement pasted all over the city on the eve of the New Year, 1923, to the effect that, because of New Year's Eve, people were allowed out in the streets of Batum all night. Stupidly trusting by nature, for all our ex-

perience, we all believed this announcement – and paid dearly for it.

Frayerman and I were celebrating New Year's Eve in Mrozovsky's flat. At three o'clock in the morning we said good-bye to our host and went home. A few steps away from the front door we were stopped by a patrol and heard the familiar word: 'Dokumenti!'

We began to argue, but the soldiers seized us firmly by the arm and took us to the spacious court-yard of the commandant's office.

The court-yard was flooded with a crowd of extraordinarily gay, singing, drunken people, who were playing on guitars, dancing the *lezghinka* and embracing each other. Like us, they had all been caught by the patrols.

Nobody knew what we had been arrested for. And on New Year's Eve no one cared. People were having a recklessly good time. Only our cross and sullen guards presented a startling contrast to the uproariously laughing crowd of prisoners.

Then we were split into groups of fifty (with Frayerman and myself placed in different groups), surrounded by a large escort and led away to prison.

As we marched along, our worry for our fate steadily mounted. Through brightly-lit windows of houses we saw the lucky people who, unlike us, had not been rash enough to come out into the streets, we saw them waltzing round with pretty women, we saw streamers and confetti flying about. As we marched along we heard the banging of pianos, out of tune because of the demands made on them on this festive occasion, we heard the clinking of glasses, we heard – inevitably – the most drunken man in the party sing in a desperate, reckless voice the drinking song 'Mraval Djamier!'

We were brought into a prison, built of concrete and entirely empty, with every sound reverberating hollowly within its walls. The corridors and cells did not have a single bench between them. There was nothing to sit on. The immediate result was aching legs.

The echo reinforced the dreary sound of rifle butts struck against the floor, the sharp cries of command and the boisterous singing of the prisoners.

But the general gaiety was dying down fairly fast. Only the

most drunken tried for a considerable time to make out what the whole thing was about and explain it to themselves. But most of us were beginning to realize that we had got into a murky and unpleasant mess.

The Italian consul and his wife were brought in towards dawn. The consul's brilliantined head reflected the dismal light of an electric bulb, the one and only in the whole prison corridor. His dinner jacket emphasized the lustre of a dazzling shirt-front and the southern blueness of his recently shaved cheeks.

The consul's wife – a tall, good looking woman – entered the prison proudly as if going to the scaffold. Her black fur had slipped off one white marble shoulder, revealing a long, refined arm and the bulging shape of her smooth breasts.

But the consul's wife did not play the part of Marie-Antoinette for very long. Suddenly she leaned against the cold wall and broke into sobs. The consul seized her by the hand and cried in a tragic voice, in French:

'Be silent, Giulietta. Be silent, at once!'

In a theatrical gesture he pressed the woman to his breast, like a true Juliet, and glared at us all with furious eyes.

Giulietta exuded a most exquisite odour of Chanel scent. But this refined and exciting smell could not, of course, displace the poisonous stench of the serving soldier's cheap tobacco which tore at one's throat. And Giulietta sobbed and sobbed.

Soon the rumour flew round the prison that we had with us in prison the author of the musical comedy 'Ivanov Pavel', very popular at the time. I forget his name. I saw him, but did not pluck up enough courage to speak to him. He turned out to be a modest, taciturn little man.

He was silent and merely smiled, while the prisoners, excited by his presence, sang in their various cells excerpts from 'Ivanov Pavel'.

Oh, the me-ri-di-ans
The me-ri-di-ans!
They intersect our lands
With strands,
Yes, Sir, our lands!

The verse about the spelling of certain words was particularly successful.

Those who don't know how to spell,
How to spell, how to spell
Can't expect to do so well,
No!

But all this singing did not last long. Soon the whole prison was sleeping a drunken, heavy sleep.

Among the prisoners I saw Dovgello and his wife. He embraced me and introduced me to his wife Wanda – a sumptous, fading blonde with a haughty face. She spoke Russian with a Polish accent and called her husband Jerzy, though he had a very Russian and common name – Yegor.

Looking at me through half-closed eyes, she said to her husband clearly and distinctly, as they do on the stage:

'I am pleased you at last have fairly decent looking colleagues.'

Dovgello blushed and seemed to shrivel up. But the imperturbable Wanda turned to me and said just as imperiously and loudly:

'I hope they won't shoot us here? That would be a boorish thing to do. What do you think?'

I made no reply. Then Wanda complained that she had drunk too much Georgian vodka, *chachi*, that she felt unbearably hot, that she was being stifled by her bodice, though it was made perfectly, according to the latest Paris model. After this she thrust her hand into her dress, deftly unbuttoned her bodice at the back and pulled it out, slightly ruffling her hair in the process.

She said 'Oof!' as she did so, stuck back into her dress one of her breasts – sumptuous and a little flabby – which had tumbled out and looked at me with an air of defiance, straight in the eye.

Indeed, she was a somewhat strange countess! Dovgello sat all wet and dishevelled. Not in vain did the compositors call Wanda a 'madam'.

I fled from Wanda and tried to hide in one of the concrete cells. But I did not succeed in hiding: in the cell I saw the poetess Flora with an unknown companion – a modest, fair-haired youth.

Flora was no less upset than the Italian woman, but rather than sob, wept quietly, blowing her nose in a tiny and entirely decorative little lace handkerchief.

Later, she suddenly fell asleep, sitting on the young man's coat, and her face became helpless and bore a hurt expression.

Seven British sailors were brought into the prison after Flora had fallen asleep with her head on the modest youth's shoulder.

They came in jauntily, their very wide bell-bottomed trousers flapping, and croaked out a greeting. The tallest and lankiest of the sailors immediately lay down on the floor along the axis of the corridor.

All the other six lay down with their heads on him as if he had been a pillow, covered their faces with their caps and fell asleep at once.

Only one of the sailors tried, through his sleep, to blow away the electric bulb which was hanging over his head. It was dying and buzzed as all dying electric bulbs do, and the sailor obviously took it for a great importunate fly.

All this was amusing, but in the morning we woke up crumpled, hungry and cross. The Italian consul and his wife had disappeared. Dovgello told us that Kurdia ('damn him, the bloody man!') had visited the prison in the night and let out the consul, the sailors and a few other people.

'All those a bit better off and a bit better dressed,' added Dovgello. 'Anyone can grease that fellow's palm. That snivelly poetess, by the way, he let her out as well. For bakshish.'

Wanda woke up and said in a hoarse, parrot-like voice that we were sacks of potatoes, not men if we could not get a helpless woman freed.

Altogether we stayed in prison without food and almost without water all that day and all the following night. The corpulent Kurdia visited the prison every three or four hours, went round the cells clanking his spurs, called out one or other of the prisoners, mainly eastern-looking gentlemen of the black-marketeer type, discussed something with them in a low voice, and the prisoner would immediately disappear.

In the afternoon he let out Wanda – and asked no money in

exchange, but kept Dovgello. I tried to speak to Kurdia, but he went past me without so much as a glance, smacking the sides of his shiny wellingtons with a riding crop.

We were witnessing bribery on a vast scale, a shameless and frank crime, with the population being robbed as it might be in some wild Turkish *vilayet* in Asia Minor.

I was simply stunned by Kurdia's calm effrontery. By now it was clear that the provocative announcement about the permission to be out all night had been stuck up by Kurdia in order to seize as many victims as possible and get rich on bribes for setting people free.

I finally succeeded in stopping him during one of his rounds and said that I was a citizen of the RSFSR[31] and demanded that the Batumi consul of the RSFSR be immediately brought to this prison.

Kurdia looked at me with undisguised contempt.

'Who are you?' he asked. 'Eh? You wouldn't want Kalinin himself to be brought here from Moscow, by any chance? You'll wait!'

He said something in Georgian to his A.D.C., laughed and was gone.

I flew into a rage. I saw Kurdia leave the prison in a sumptuous carriage drawn by a pair of black thoroughbreds. Quickly I went to the prison office. There was a telephone hanging on the wall, and beside it, dolefully singing, sat a sentry – a dark, lean man who looked like a boot-black.

I pulled off, rather than took, the receiver. The sentry tried to get up, but I pushed him in the chest. He fell back on the seat of the cane chair – the seat gave a weak cracking noise, broke and fell through. The sentry remained stuck in the chair.

I asked to be connected with the Russian Consul Luntz. I should, of course, have rung up the Revolutionary Committee of Adzharia, but I decided that the grand-sounding title of 'consul' must make a powerful impression on Kurdia.

Panting with indignation and with the effort of having to hold the sentry by his chest to prevent him from getting out of the broken chair, I told Luntz of what was happening in the prison.

'I'll be there in an hour's time,' said Luntz. 'Apart from you, are there any RSFSR citizens in the prison?'

'There are.'

I put down the receiver. The sentry disentangled himself from the chair, seized the receiver, called Kurdia's A.D.C. to the telephone and hastily let out a piteous cry. Then he raised his rifle and brandished its butt in my face, but could not bring himself to hit me. I went out.

But I never met Luntz, after all. A quarter of an hour later, Kurdia, escorted by his entire retinue, came to me in my cell (the cells, as a matter of fact, were not locked).

He beamed, smiled, clanked his spurs and said to me, with bowed head:

'A regrettable misunderstanding, my dear chap! I didn't know you were working for the *Trudovoy Batum*. I trust you are in good health?'

'Mind your own business!' I answered. 'Why were all these people arrested, including me? Why have you been keeping us in prison for the last forty-eight hours? Why did you let some of the prisoners out? What service did you get out of them in exchange?'

'Why get angry, my dear chap?' said Kurdia, bent on conciliation and immediately becoming familiar. 'You hurt me! You really do! It's naughty! I may take offence, you know! Have my carriage. It's entirely at your disposal. Go home and forget it. It was a misunderstanding, see? A misunderstanding! Please go, I beg you.'

I agreed and took Dovgello with me. Kurdia did not object.

While I was going down the short stairs into the prison yard where the commandant's carriage was glistening like a black diamond, Kurdia's A.D.C. was respectfully supporting me by the elbow.

When the carriage started, Kurdia and his retinue waved to us in friendly fashion, as if seeing off dear friends.

Of course, I craved for vengeance, but this wish expressed itself in an absolutely puerile act: I decided to retain the commandant's carriage for as long as possible and ordered the coachman to take us to the Sinyavskys on the Bartskhana.

There we had a drink and made the coachman hopelessly drunk.

After this he started racing Batumi cabbies on the road, letting out wild cries and cat-calls, hooked his wheel on the wheel of a cart with a barrel of wine, broke his wheel, got off, tethered his horses to a plane tree, waved his hand in sign of despair and wandered off sobbing in the direction of Chakva, away from Batum. We did not stop him. We also got out and went back home.

Three days later Kurdia was arrested and tried.

23
The Last Ray

As it falls on the earth the last ray of sunshine makes it appear quite different than it looked when the sunrays were more direct.

Everything becomes more prominent and ponderable. Colours acquire density and make the near distance even more proximate to us, while at the same time drawing out the middle distance into limpid infinity. It slowly fades as the sun gradually leaves the horizon.

The beauty of eventide consists precisely in lending density to colours and an extraordinary lightness to the atmosphere.

This effect of the last ray of sunshine was first seen by artists, particularly by Claude Lorrain, Manet, Turner, our own Levitan and many others. By following their gaze, we saw what they saw.

Just now I caught myself out at something which has always bothered me. Whenever I break up a more or less sober flow of prose and rush into my favourite domain of sounds and colours, I am apt to lose all sense of proportion.

The desire to transmit to others my vision of the world can be so strong that the necessity to keep things in proportion recedes when faced by it.

And so now I have started talking of sunsets, while I should be writing about my departure from Batum and casting a glance on that unusual and picturesque city.

I have long noticed (though this is very subjective) that whenever we say farewell to some corner of the globe, it appears before us in its most advantageous and vivid light: in fact, as a landscape lit by the last rays of sunset.

So it was with Batum. Frayerman and I had already fixed our day of departure.

As always in moments of separation for a long time and even, perhaps, for ever, everything in Batum now appeared dear to me – even the rain and the greasy smoke of tankers.

Winter, gloomy and mild, took up its abode in the port. The portholes of ships glowed from inside, as if Christmas trees had been lit in all the cabins. The sea was becoming calm after a storm and sang sleepily as it rummaged through the shingle. The colour of the water was light grey, but wonderfully warm and translucent.

The exaggerated intensity of southern hues and the somewhat strident colour of the sea disappeared and became more restrained.

Colours acquired new combinations, which were never there in the summer.

Once I saw a tall cargo ship, all red with rust, crawl into port. The sea was choppy and the foam of the waves licked the sides of the ship and immediately melted away.

The setting sun was shining sullenly, low over the horizon. The combination of white foam, rusty-brown ship, and the red flame of the sun in the windows of the deck superstructures struck me as one of the most picturesque sights I had ever seen on earth.

The sun set. The evening, lightly veiled with a lilac bloom, brought silence with it. Only somewhere far away from the port the faint singing of a sazandari lent its own beauty to that silence.

Whenever the last ray of the sun fell on Batum, the city always took on the semblance of a smoking heap of rusty iron, thrown at the foot of sombre mountains.

Never did I see at a Batumi sunset the famous 'green ray' of which I had heard so many people talk. Kuprin wrote about it, by the way.

During the last few days of my life in Batum I often went to Cape Zeleny and to Chakva. The superabundance of vegetation on Cape Zeleny was well-nigh uncanny. One had the impression that those leafy Niagaras would one day stop the small local train with its open, toy-like little carriages.

The last evening we all gathered at the Sinyavskys in Bartskhana. Frayerman, Chachikov, Mrozovsky, Dovgello, the proofreader Semyon Akopovich and Nirk were all there.

Lucienna fried plaice pastries. Chachikov brought a guitar.

We sang many songs to its accompaniment, mostly sad ones, but they did not make us sad. Probably because Batum for all of us (except Mrozovsky) was merely a stage on that vast road of life which still stretched out before us. It beckoned us on, and promised surprises – nebulous, maybe, but definitely tempting – new work, new people, new misfortunes and successes.

How strange is man's nature: in spite of an interesting life in the present, we yearned for the future and talked about it endlessly. We lived for the future. In the present and the past we merely looked for proof that these future days would come. They would come – of that we were convinced, despite all the obstacles, harsh obstacles at times, that stood in the way.

Towards the morning, at the spot where the railway curved near Cape Zeleny, the Black Sea sparkled through the carriage windows, and my heart stopped beating: I was saying good-bye to the sea for a long time, perhaps for ever.

But my sad and lyrical reflections at the carriage window were interrupted by a sudden furious cry:

'Come on, show your ticket!'

I turned round quickly. Behind me stood a swarthy, hook-nosed man with a face which bore the imprint of failure. He wore dusty, black riding breeches with an orange piping, down at heel *chuvyaki*[32] and mauve socks. To prevent them from falling, the strange man wore bright-red garters tied just below the knees.

Behind the man stood two grinning soldiers with rifles, also wearing mauve socks, chuvyaki and garters.

I was too surprised to say anything. The gloomy man then shouted once again in a furious voice, but blushing this time from sheer impatience:

'Come on, show your ticket!'

Then I realized that this was an ordinary ticket controller. I finally realized it on catching sight of several embarrassed-looking ticketless passengers standing beside the armed youths. They were

gazing at me with sympathy and interest as at a companion in misfortune.

I handed him my ticket. The controller looked at it with a bored air, punched a hole in it and suddenly threw himself like a hawk at my neighbour – an old man with a basket of eggs:

'Come on, show your ticket!'

The old man smiled gently, but did not show his ticket. Instead, he got up and silently joined the ticketless crowd.

The sniggering youths with rifles drove the ticketless passengers into the next carriage, like a flock of sheep. The controller went there too.

'They always shout like this,' was the bitter complaint of an old Georgian woman in a little round black hat – *kehkeh* – and with a muslin veil at the back. 'You can get deaf on this railway before you reach Zestafoni. A misfortune! A real misfortune!'

'They take things by assault,' a cheerful sailor explained. 'But why, nobody knows. As if all that shouting of theirs would make the ticket appear.'

'Strange things do happen,' said an old Greek in spectacles. 'A bad man shouting can make the earth stop in its tracks, old chap!'

I soon got used to the odd habits one witnessed on Transcaucasian railways. But this first time Frayerman and I laughed till we cried.

24
A Hint of Winter

Two whole years I had not seen either ice or snow. Or rather I did not notice them. True, the streets in Odessa were sometimes covered with ice in the winter, but winter days were so sullen and devoid of light that they took away all desire to look at anything. And so I had only a vague recollection of Odessa's ice and snow.

But in Tiflis Frayerman and I stepped out of the railway station immediately into sunlight, multi-coloured and reflected by windows of houses, into the sparkle of small puddles covered with the thinnest film of ice I had ever seen. It was irridescent, it flared up, went out, glittered again and seemed to blaze as if it consisted of millions of icy fish-scales.

This light and the icy glitter of the air constituted my first impression of Tiflis – a mysterious and thrilling city, a kind of Florence of the East.

I had imagined Tiflis to be less interesting than it turned out to be.

I did not know that Tiflis had a winter, faint, but still a winter. Or rather a hint of winter. It resembles our clear and cool Septembers. The smell of ice in shady front gardens and thawed out puddles on pavements warmed by the sun form part of obvious but short-lived indications of winter.

Besides, here and there a faint smell of smoke and coal from fire-places and frying grills filtered out of houses and on to the streets.

On the station square we stopped, struck by the sight of the hilly quarters of the city. The morning lay in them, quiet and cool.

For some reason it occurred to me that in that city all kinds of interesting things could, and even, perhaps, must, happen.

This feeling was somehow gay and akin to a fairy story. It caused a tremor of excitement within me that rose and fell.

By then I knew many places and cities in Russia. Some of these cities had captured me at once by their very originality. But I had never yet seen such a confused, garish and magnificent city as Tiflis.

In the course of the few minutes that Frayerman and I stood in the station square I came to the conclusion that life in Tiflis was bound to have an effect on me and that that city could not fail to influence my fate. Of course I immediately laughed at these thoughts of mine, but could not chase them away. They hid somewhere deep in my consciousness and frequently made their presence felt.

The conviction that something pleasant and unexpected would happen to me in Tiflis was justified a short time after our arrival there.

While Frayerman and I were looking at the city and exchanging fairly enthusiastic comments, an old, grey-haired musha came up silently in his soft chuvyaki, quickly seized our suit-cases, threw them up deftly on his back – his 'hump' – and ran, slightly bobbing up and down, away from the station and towards a narrow, winding side-street.

We were quite dumbfounded. Frayerman was the first to recover. He let out a cry and ran in pursuit of the musha. I rushed after him.

The musha kept looking back and shouting as he ran:

'Never you fear, katso! We'll stop and have a rest when we get to the corner. Never you fear!'

We could not understand anything. The thought that the musha was a thief immediately vanished after his worried cry.

But we never succeeded in reaching the corner. Young mushas suddenly jumped out from behind several gates. Uttering desperate, guttural cries they surrounded our musha, took away the suit-cases flung them in the middle of the street and started pushing the old man back towards the railway station. They shouted so much and

so angrily rolled their eyes that it looked as if at any minute a murder would be committed.

We rushed to the rescue of the old musha. Then the young mushas stopped shouting and began laughing, while the old musha, gently smiling, took off his cap and asked to be paid if only a little bit for the run from the station to the corner.

I paid. The mushas wiped the sweat from their brows, took out cigarettes, lit them then and there and offered one to the old man. They were chuckling.

Then they explained to us that Tiflis was divided by the musha companies into districts and no musha had the right to pirate work in a district that was not his, as the old man had done.

Apparently, his district began just round the corner. That was why the old man was in a hurry to reach that corner, but fell into an ambush. Beyond the corner he would have been safe.

This was confirmed by the policeman who had come up as a result of all the noise.

He was very pleased with the incident, possible, of course, only in the case of people who had arrived in Tiflis for the first time. And with great courtesy, he apologized for 'the little trouble'.

'Men want equality,' he explained to us. 'Equality! The achievement of the revolution, *genatsvali*![33] Here I am responsible for every musha and for all the things you see. Entirely responsible. Welcome to my office! Always glad to do you a friendly service.'

Two young mushas took our suitcases and, swinging them about as if they were empty boxes, went in front of us to the address I gave them.

At the least and every opportunity they sat down on some steps to rest and then, becoming bolder, took to stopping at small dukhans in cellars, and at each one having a small glass of red wine with us.

With every glass our mood became increasingly cheerful and care-free.

We prattled on and on without ceasing, and the passers-by smiled at us. Tiflis made a noise like a waterfall (it was, in fact, the muddy Kura river at the Vera Bridge), hawkers cried in sing-song tenor voices: 'Lettuce, spinach, green onions, young radishes!'

The sparkle of the Tiflis winter was reflected all around us in the thin slices of ice broken by pedestrians, the dense sky, the shining, polished brasses on the harness of black mules, carrying Attic jugs of *matsoni*.[34] The windows and the varnished sides of trams sparkled, too, intolerably. The trams tore along Golovin Avenue and looked like those travelling bands one sees at fairs – so much ringing, rattling, clanking, laughter and shouting they carried with them, making new boys from the North like Frayerman and me feel quite bewildered.

The small glasses of wine which marked our slow, but sure progress through Tiflis played a fortunate role: they did away with my usual shyness.

The point was that Mrozovsky had written to his relatives in Tiflis and had rented a room for me in their house in my absence. Frayerman already had a room waiting for him, found by Sonia.

I was a bit shy of taking up my abode in the room rented for me by Mrozovky since I knew that Mrozovsky's cousins were the futurist brothers, well-known in the Caucasus, called Zdanevich – the poet Ilya and the artist Kyril. I knew that Mayakovsky stayed with them whenever he was in Tiflis, and that all Georgian artists and poets – Lado Gudiashvili, Titian Tabidzeh and many others – were constant visitors at their house. This, of course, made me feel embarrassed.

By now my embarrassment had melted away in the light Kakhetian wine without leaving a trace.

The Zdaneviches lived in an old house with large and intricate wooden verandahs, faded Persian carpets and a lot of cracked furniture. The stairs leading to the rickety verandahs swayed underfoot, but no one seemed to care.

From the verandahs could be seen the snow on the Glavny range, far away on the horizon.

The sound of the piano, of female voices singing, the reading of poetry and noisy arguments and quarrels could be heard from morning till late at night coming from the rooms occupied by the Zdaneviches.

Pigeons walked, limping, about all the verandahs and corridors.

When people were silent, the whole house softly and passionately cooed.

Besides, from early morning you could hear people repeating French declensions and conjugations in every corner of the house. This was old Zdanevich – a former school-master – giving French lessons to several dumbheads and dunces at once. All the dunces without exception had dreary, dismal voices.

Once every half-hour, and sometimes more often, plates were dropped and broken. At once, a lame dachshund would hurry to the scene of the accident and bark long and loud at the culprit.

The dachshund had odd quirks of its own. It would never enter my room, but would merely push the door ajar with its muzzle, stick its head in and gaze at me with its languid, oriental eyes giving me a fixed and searching stare. It could stand thus for hours, but sometimes it would suddenly jump, curve its body and somehow manage to dig its teeth into its side with a terrifying sound.

On the very first evening of my arrival I had the visit of old Mrs Valentina Zdanevich, my hostess. She asked to be allowed to stay in my room for a while in order to get away from what she called 'the gypsy camp'. My room, it is true, was the quietest of all.

It became a custom, ever since: Mrs Zdanevich would often come and stay in my room for a little chat, and I was very pleased about it.

Soon I became very fond of this little old woman, in pince-nez, an Imeretian by origin, a former singer and pupil of Tchaikovsky.

Mrs Zdanevich's perspicacity, lively mind and calm manner always amazed me. She had brought up two sons – the poet Ilya and the painter Kyril. Her sons were militant futurists. Ilya was rightly considered one of the leaders of futurism together with Burlyuk and Kruchenykh. He had studied in Petersburg University. The newspapers of the time frequently wrote about the rows he used to create at Petersburg literary evenings.

He founded in Tiflis a society of 'left wing' poets and artists. It was called 'Latitude Forty One' (in reference to the degree of latitude which passed near Tiflis).

But Ilya Zdanevich as well as Kyril deserve a story to themselves.

In the meantime I would like to finish describing the Zdanevich house and its inhabitants.

On crossing its threshold I was completely taken aback. The walls of the rooms, the verandahs and the corridors, even the larders and the bathroom were covered from floor to ceiling with pictures of unusual design and colour. Many pictures, for which no place could be found on the walls were standing rolled up in corners.

All these pictures belonged to the brush of one and the same artist, but his Georgian signature – 'Niko Pirosmanishvili' – could only very rarely be found.

About Pirosmanishvili I shall speak a little later. Just now I want to describe to the best of my ability the strange impression his pictures made on me. For two whole months I could not get used to them and lived in a very concrete and yet half-real world.

The subject was mainly the Caucasus, fantastic and at the same time strictly accurate. And not only the Caucasus, but various events as well, observed in a way totally different to the one we are accustomed to. Only a blind man who had recovered his sight could see things in such a fresh and naïve light. Or a man who had suddenly woken up before reality had lost its bloom of dreams.

My room also had Pirosmanishvili's pictures (Pirosman's, as the Zdaneviches called him for short) hanging in it. I therefore had time to study and grow fond of them.

By the side of these pictures, the elegant ornamental design which decorated the walls of my room was quite lost. It had been executed by Persian artists working for the Persian consul in Tiflis who had lived here before me as a lodger of the Zdaneviches.

In addition to pictures, the rooms also had a great many flowers. The whole place was like a hot-house.

The flowers were often sprinkled with fresh water. The rooms, therefore, smelt of damp earth and leaves.

When the sun beat on the windows, the interior of the house put one in mind of a summer's day after a shower: drops of warm indoor rain glittered as they fell in quick succession from every leaf, branch and flower.

There were practically no bouquets or cut flowers in the house.

Instead, pieces of bark, like tiny troughs, lay everywhere about the rooms. They were filled with all kinds of growing flowers: violets and crocuses, edelweiss and camelias – and mosses of all colours: emerald green, rusty-red, black, golden, red and lemon. The mosses smelt of iodine.

Besides flowers and mosses, the pieces of bark also contained small ferns, mare's-tails, all sorts of interesting things of the vegetable and animal world, including roots which had the shape of knights and bashful maidens bathing. Dead butterflies sat on the mosses. They looked like the abstract drawings of 'left-wing' artists.

Maria, the effusive Polish woman painter who lived in the Zdanevich house and made up these extraordinary 'bouquets', called them 'suprematist moths',[35] and asked in her softly insinuating, typically Polish manner, in a sing-song voice:

'Wha-a-t? Isn't that so-o? Don't they look like it?'

A great many books were strewn all over the house, slim volumes mainly, with strident titles and equally strident covers. They were covered with drawings of coloured semi-circles, women's breasts and zig-zag rays.

The most popular book of poetry was the one with the title: 'Flourish, poetry, you bitch!' It was set up in every kind of type available in Tiflis – from poster to Pearl and from italics to Elsevir. Words were separated by setting rules, rows of dots, letters borrowed from the Armenian, Georgian and Arab alphabets, musical notation printed upside down, question marks, coronets (blocks for these were kept in printing shops before the Revolution entirely for visiting cards), tail-pieces representing cupids and wreaths of roses.

I studied this book with a considerable amount of pleasure as a sort of collection of printer's type.

There were many books in meaningless language. One of them was called by a single letter – U. Tables were cluttered up with piles of drawings, mainly cubist. All the women in these drawings looked like girl-friends of Neanderthal men. Sometimes in these drawings houses fell apart, cleft in several pieces by enormous flashes of lightning with broad tails behind them. This, apparently,

was supposed to represent an earthquake. I never ventured to ask Kyril Zdanevich the meaning of these drawings. Kyril was not a talkative man.

Kyril's brother – Ilya – had been living in Paris for over a year and had become friends with Picasso. The Zdaneviches spoke about Ilya as if he had just gone out of the room.

Everything was done the way Ilya liked it to be done. No one was allowed to touch his things. Everybody, and particularly his mother, would have regarded it as sacrilege.

At first, I conscientiously read Ilya's poems – 'The Ass for Hire', 'Yanko, King of Albania' – but could make very little of them. They gave me a headache. But I could not admit it: failure to understand Ilya's poetry was, for his friends and relations, a sign of philistinism and utter lack of talent in the reader.

I soon noticed that only Maria – bold and mocking – had the right not to admire Ilya.

'I have paid my tribute to futurism and am now as free as a bird,' she said in her sing-song voice.

'What tribute?' I asked.

'Shall I show you?' she said, and went into the next room without waiting for my answer. When she came back a rose blazed on her cheek, painted in oils with a bold and sweeping brush.

'Good, isn't it?' she asked, trying not to smile so as not to spoil the freshly painted picture. 'That's how I paraded up and down Golovin Avenue with all the poets. Funny? Isn't it?'

This conversation with Maria took place almost a month after I had come to stay with the Zdaneviches. But the first time I met Maria was both strange and funny.

I had an open fireplace in my room. On the evening of my arrival I went out on the verandah to fetch some firewood. The firewood consisted of small, prickly branches, not logs as we had in Moscow.

I had to pass through the dining room. Sitting at the table, drinking tea were Mrs Zdanevich, old Zdanevich, a tall young woman slender as a snake, and another young woman with limpid green eyes, vivid laughing lips and a rather haughty face,

pale as with pent-up emotion. A heavy silver bracelet was jingling on her wrist.

'Allow me,' said Mrs Zdanevich turning to me and indicating the woman, 'to introduce you. This is our Maria. Please don't be frightened by the things she says.'

Maria got up in a precipitately-impetuous manner and stretched out her hand. The bracelet jingled. She looked me straight in the eyes and smiled, and suddenly, though there was no need for it, looked round nervously and quickly – a portrait of her painted boldly and yet tenderly was hanging on the wall behind her.

'It's by the poet Terentyev,' said old Zdanevich. 'He was a pupil of mine in French and always got top marks for it in school.'

Maria smiled ever so slightly. She did not say a word. Neither did I.

'I'm sorry,' said Mrs Zdanevich hastily, as if suddenly remembering something. 'And now this dark-looking woman, a delightful creature, is our friend Zivka, the friend of all of us here, a Montenegrin.'

'Montenegro in Serbian is Tsrna Gura,' said old Zdanevich, and suddenly and with feeling declaimed some verses by Alexis Tolstoy on the subject of Montenegrins.

Everyone kept their eyes glued to the floor. In the house next door a weak tenor was singing:

All around a wreath was blooming
Of white Idumean lilies. . . .

'It's flowers that bloom, not wreaths,' said old Zdanevich crossly.

Again no one made any comment.

'Sit down,' Maria said to me. 'I'll pour you out some tea.'

'Just a minute. Let me go to the kitchen and get some firewood for my room.'

I went into the kitchen. It was dark. Outside I could see the stars, solitary and over-bright over the vague outline of mountain tops.

I collected the firewood and went back. Now there were only

Maria and the Montenegrin girl in the dining room. The old people had gone.

Maria looked at me attentively. At that moment the whole bundle of firewood came apart and fell on the floor.

'Oh, Maria, what a mess,' said the Montenegrin girl in a tone of complete indifference.

'I knew it,' said Maria sadly and got up. 'It had to be. Wait a bit, I'll help you.'

She quickly gathered the firewood, but did not give it to me to carry. She took it to my room herself and laid the fire and lit it.

She knelt down in front of the grate and, bending her head very low so that her cheek almost touched the floor, she blew on the weak fire. The branches crackled and shot out sparks.

I wanted to tell her to get up. Her wavy chestnut hair was falling on the floor all the time and she flung it back with an impatient gesture which made her bracelet jingle on her wrist.

For a long time we were silent. Then I asked her:

'You said it had to be. What does it mean?'

She raised her head and looked at me from below, and the sparkle of her eyes which were looking at me in alarm, made me suddenly start.

'It means that I am an irresponsible fool,' she replied, and went out of the room. 'Come and have your tea.'

Thus did the unexpected and delightful thing, the thought of which first came to me on the railway station in Tiflis, actually happen.

25
A Simple Oil-Cloth

In the suburbs of Tiflis were the famous Vera and Ortachaly Gardens.

They were a place of rest and relaxation in the summer. Almost every garden was turned into a music hall or a dukhan.

As evening fell and the heat abated the Tiflisians would begin making their way to those gardens. The richer ones took cabs, and the poorer went on foot.

The names of the music-halls were both pompous and in bad taste. The most expensive was called 'Eldorado'. After that came 'Fantasia', 'Sans-Souci', 'Chanteclair' and 'The Gentleman'.

In the neighbourhood of the Ortachaly Gardens were situated the so-called 'gay' streets. Many music-hall patrons would first visit these streets and then arrive bringing with them some noisy girls.

What would a Tiflis citizen expect to find in these gardens? Coolness, a slight smell of mutton, singing, dancing, games of chance such as lotto, and good-looking, coarse women.

Coolness in the shadow of plane – and mulberry – trees was a particular attraction. It was difficult to conceive how it persisted while the whole of Tiflis lay next to it in a sultry hollow, within a ring of mountains warmed up by the sun, making it terrible to look at from the surrounding heights. Tiflis appeared to be steaming and incandescent and ready suddenly to flare up in a gigantic bonfire.

Perhaps it was the fountains that gave out that coolness or perhaps the whiff of mountain snows was able to penetrate into

the gardens. Only just before dawn was it possible to breathe in the city, when the houses had cooled down a little over night. But no sooner did the sun come up from the direction of Kakhetia than the exhausting heat flooded the streets.

Among the singers in the Vera Gardens was a woman, lazy, broad in the shoulders, but with a slender waist, with hair the colour of bronze, a delicate, but powerful neck and a pink body. She was called Margarita.

The patrons of the music-halls where she sang in the evenings, considered her to be a russified German, but the owner of the garden – a touchy Mingrelian – kicked up a real row every time he heard this being said.

'Your brains must have turned upside down in your head!' he would shout to anyone who said it. 'Have you ever heard of a country called France?'

'I have, yes,' the man would answer gloomily.

'And have you ever heard of a province in France called Alsace? You have? Well now, that's where she comes from – Alsace. A high-grade Frenchwoman. Lord, what people! Don't know anything! They know all about quarrelling, oh yes! or not giving change, or running after girls in the streets, or cheating at cards, they know that all right, but when it comes to using their brains – they're stumped!'

Margarita rarely agreed to have supper with the customers, but accepted small presents from them with complete indifference as if these were her due. Then she gave them away to the other girls. She had no boy-friend.

Altogether, it was difficult to make out what she thought about things, and particularly about men. Many wanted her for a mistress.

She spoke little, and sang in an extraordinary, people said 'double', voice.

Opera singers and musicians came to hear her. Margarita's singing gave the impression of always being accompanied by a kind of sub-voice, like a faint echo.

Actors said that this was a so-called 'vocal illusion', just as there can, for instance, be an optical illusion. In actual fact, however, there was no second voice. So they said and argued, and yet when

Margarita sang everyone heard the double-sound effect of her voice. As if the main voice were golden and the second silver.

One evening the singers and musicians rented the dukhan 'Varyag', invited Margarita and had a private concert for amateurs of music.

After the concert the old conductor got up and said that the human voice was the most complex of intruments. It was richer than the piano or the violin, and therefore the simultaneous presence of several tones in a voice was both possible and natural.

Margarita drank her wine, without raising her eyes. The red silk of her dress was reflected in her hair which seemed on fire. From time to time she raised her eyes and slowly looked round the room at the people sitting at their tables, but her eyes contained no fire or smile in their misty depths.

A tall, very lean Georgian with a thin face and sad eyes, wearing an old jacket, stood motionless, leaning against the door-post, and gazed at Margarita.

It was the wandering painter Niko Pirosmanishvili. He loved Margarita. For him she was the only human being in the world. Every inch of the ground untouched by Margarita's foot seemed to him a desert. But wherever the ground had conserved her footprint it was holy ground. Its every grain of sand gave out heat like a tiny diamond.

Thus, obviously, would Iranian poets of average quality have sung about Pirosman's feelings. And yet they would have been right, in spite of the flowery language.

The day when Niko did not hear her voice, was for him the most silent of days.

Excessive love evokes desires beyond the ken of sober people. How can it occur to any man in his ordinary, workaday senses to want to kiss a human voice or carefully pet a singing oriole on the head or even laugh with the sparrows, as all around you they raise a furious racket, din and dust?

Pirosman sometimes had the extraordinary desire gently to touch Margarita's quivering throat as she sang, the desire to let his breath merely brush past that mysterious voice, that warm stream of air which gave out such a magnificent, exciting sound.

People say that a love too great conquers the loved one.

Niko's love did not conquer Margarita. So, at least, everyone thought. And yet it was not clear whether this was so. Niko himself could not say. Margarita lived as in a dream. Her heart was locked to all men. People needed her beauty. But, evidently, she had no need for it herself, for all that she dressed well and was careful about her personal appearance. In her rustling silks, exhaling all the perfumes of the east, she seemed the incarnation of mature womanhood.

But there was something menacing in her beauty and she seemed to realize it herself.

No one knew for sure where Pirosman had come from.

Afterwards, after Pirosman's death, Kyril Zdanevich gathered the facts of his life crumb by crumb and was able to build up his biography.

Pirosman was born in 1862, the son of a poor peasant, in the Kakhetian village of Mirzaki. When he was still only a boy his parents sent him away to be a servant in a well-to-do family in Tiflis.

Pirosman worked as a servant till the age of twenty. Then he became a conductor on the Transcaucasian railway. It was then he took up drawing. His first work was the portrait of the station-master and his wife. It was obviously a very unkind portrait, more like a caricature, because the station-master sacked Pirosman on the spot, as soon as he saw it.

What was he to do? He could not do what most poor men in Tiflis did at the time – go in for shady deals, successful and unsuccessful swindling. For this Pirosman was too sincere and proud.

He was not an idler or a Tiflis *kinto* – a near-beggar, gay and impudent. He did not know, as a kinto does, how to make money 'out of air', out of a funny story, out of a dirty joke, out of 'a mule's cry'.

At one time Pirosman used to sell milk in the back yards off the main square, and managed somehow to eke out a meagre existence. But this occupation, too, repelled him.

He loved painting and only painting, and the first thing he did

was to decorate the whole of his shop by painting frescoes on its walls till it looked like a magnificent flower.

Sometimes he sold his paintings – his little pictures, as people called them – to dealers in all sorts of articles for which there was but a small demand. Such articles were, as they say, intended 'for amateurs', and were called by the mysterious foreign name 'bric-à-brac'. Dealers considered it a very beautiful and attractive word, particularly since neither the dealers, nor Pirosman, nor the customers knew what it meant.

But to rely on this word alone was not enough. Would-be buyers were very surprised, even frightened by the pictures and did not want them. And the dealers paid Pirosman next to nothing for his pictures.

And Pirosman went hungry. Sometimes, he would sit down, lean against the wall of a house or the trunk of a dusty old tree, old as the hills, and wait for the giddiness to pass.

In the end he had to go back to his village where he inevitably had to bear the whole brunt of social and family traditions.

His house in the village he also decorated from top to bottom to the great delight of neighbours and relations by painting on its walls.

Then Pirosman threw a great party. Afterwards he painted four pictures, representing this village feast. The feast was extraordinary in that, unlike most feasts, it had no rich people at it. The guests stood, sat and lay, raising high their drinking horns filled with wine. This picturesque and colourful crowd was painted by Pirosman in very bold strokes.

Finally, Pirosman devised what seemed to him an excellent way out of the situation. He went back to Tiflis and started painting bright inn-signs for dukhans for the price of a few dinners, including wine, and a few suppers. Part of the payment he took in money in order to buy paints and pay for his lodgings.

But he never had enough money for his materials. The dukhan-keepers were only too pleased to take down the old tin sign-boards and offer them to him to paint on, after daubing out the old, blackened picture. But Pirosman would have none of it.

The tin signboards tended to rust. And Pirosman knew that

though he might be an untutored painter, self-taught as they say, he could well compete in the power and purity of line and colour with some of the great painters (he had seen good reproductions of their pictures). Perhaps even with Delacroix himself; a schoolboy, who also dreamed of becoming a painter, had told him a lot about that Frenchman.

Pirosman had no painting materials and therefore took to painting on the only thing which was always at hand in every, even the cheapest, dukhan – an ordinary oil-cloth off one of the tables.

The oil-cloths were black and white. Pirosman left patches of the oil-cloth he was painting on untouched where necessary.

Later he used this method in painting portraits. The impression produced by some of the things painted in this way was unusual.

I have never been able to forget his oil-cloth called 'The Prince', on which a pale old man with a horn in his hand stands on a barren piece of ground. Behind him are the mountains of the Caucasus reduced almost to a topographical plan. The Prince's cherkeska, deep black in colour, particularly in the light of dawn, was in fact a patch of oil-cloth left unpainted. I could not understand what colours had been used to give the effect of that light.

For portraits such as this one Pirosman at the peak of his success got twenty to thirty roubles.

Patrons of dukhans liked Pirosman's sign-boards – transparent grapes, pumpkins, orange *khurma*, curly tangerine groves and sumptuous still-lifes, representing various grasses, egg plants, kebbab, cheese and fried fish.

But Pirosman could not paint these signboard still-lifes for ever. Inevitably, excess bred boredom. Then Pirosman took to painting on his signboards crowded scenes of festive meals eaten on narrow peasant tablecloths stretched out on the grass. Men, landscapes and animals – mainly the patient mules – now made their appearance on the signboards.

Sometimes, Pirosman and the dukhan-keeper would together invent a name for the dukhan. The odder the name the more it was liked.

Pirosman would grin and write: 'Kebbabs in electric style', or 'You must never drink alone'.

Such provocative names were particularly popular in provincial Georgia, somewhere in Ozuregety or Akhalkalakhi or Sagaredzho.

I arrived too late to know Pirosman; he died before I came to Tiflis.

Pirosman left behind him a great wealth of pictures. His pictures were collected for years on end by Kyril Zdanevich, and collected literally one by one. He was able to find practically the whole of Pirosman's legacy, saved the work of a wonderful popular artist, accomplished a real feat and afterwards presented his collection of Pirosman's pictures to the State, in other words to the people.

In 1913 Kyril Zdanevich met the two artists Goncharova and Larionov[36] in Petrograd. They had come to Petrograd from Moldavia and brought with them a few funny and very picturesque sign-boards which they had found in Tiraspol.

Kyril Zdanevich liked these signboards immensely. Soon afterwards in Tiflis he saw another and yet more picturesque signboard in a dukhan named 'Varyag' and bought it. It was painted by an unknown artist Niko Pirosmanishvili.

Kyril had friends among peasants, dukhan-keepers, itinerant musicians, village school-masters. He asked them all to look for pictures and signboards by Pirosman.

At first the dukhan-keepers sold the signboards for next to nothing. But soon a rumour spread throughout Georgia that some artist in Tiflis was buying them supposedly for abroad, and the dukhan-keepers took to raising their prices.

The old Zdanevich couple and Kyril were all very poor at the time. I witnessed one occasion when the purchase of a Pirosman picture put the whole family on bread and water. Maria went off to the Dezertir bazaar to sell her last earrings or last jacket. Kyril rushed about Tiflis in the hope of earning a little bit of money somehow, the old man took money in advance from his dumb-heads.

At last the sullen-looking Kyril (the more deeply he was moved the more sullen he looked) brought the picture, unpacked it in total silence and said: 'Well, what do you think of it?'–and after

this the picture held for several days the place of honour on the drawing room wall.

After this Kyril stayed indoors to sleep off all the excitement; and then began the pilgrimage of those interested in painting. From my room I could hear all the conversation in the drawing room, and soon I knew by heart the history of all the new pictures.

I got to know Pirosman the very first day of my arrival in Tiflis.

As I have said before, the walls of my room from picture-rail to skirting were hung with Pirosman's oil-cloths.

On the day I arrived I gave them only a cursory look. Besides, it was a winter day and the room was dark. However, for some obscure reason I felt uneasy in my mind as if I had been taken by the hand and quickly rushed through some fantastic country, which I had seen before or which I had dreamed about a long time ago and which now I could not wait to look at and get to know in every detail.

I went to sleep still feeling troubled. Troubled by the unfamiliar pictures which surrounded me in total silence and – so it seemed to me – never took their eyes off me.

I woke up probably very early. Sunlight, sharp and dry, lay obliquely across the wall opposite.

I glanced at the wall and leapt up. My heart thumped heavily and yet rapidly.

A strange animal – as taut as a string – was looking straight at me from the wall, anxiously, interrogatively, obviously suffering, but unable to tell me why it suffered.

It was a giraffe. An ordinary giraffe, which Pirosman had obviously seen in the old Tiflis zoo.

I turned away my head. But I felt – in fact I knew – that the giraffe was looking at me with close attention and was fully aware of all that was in my mind.

There was deathly silence throughout the house. Everyone was still asleep. I looked away and immediately it seemed to me that the giraffe had stepped out of its simple wooden frame and was standing beside me, waiting for me to say something very simple and important, which would break the spell that held him

prisoner, bring him back to life and free him from the dry and dusty oil-cloth to which for so many years he had been so firmly fixed.

Suddenly, from the yard outside rose a desperate, inhuman cry: '*Matsoni*!! *Matsoni*!!' Thus, for some reason, cried all matsoni (Caucasian yoghourt) vendors – desperately, with almost a sob in their voices. They hawked the stuff all round the town, with jugs of matsoni placed in bags loaded across the backs of little black donkeys, so dusty that they gave the impression of being used by people to wipe their feet on as if they were doormats.

I started at the matsoni-vendor's cry, shivered and groaned.

I continued to shiver. My groans became louder as I tried to stop shivering. The giraffe faded into the dingy oil-cloth. A white sun, the Kakhetian sun, beat down on the window frames and I saw a frightened Maria by my side, saw a lock of her shiny chestnut hair aslant her cheek, then saw Mrs Zdanevich. She was looking at me carefully over the rim of her spectacles. Then I realized that I had succombed – in Tiflis now – to a severe attack of malaria.

Mrs Zdanevich went, and Maria put a cold wet bandage on my forehead, bent over me and pressed her cheek to my lips to see if I had a high temperature. And I was grateful for this business-like gesture as for a distant caress carelessly bestowed.

Soon I got to know almost all Pirosman's pictures. They helped me to understand and become fond of the Caucasus – a complex country, as beautiful as a mosaic.

Pirosman became for me an encyclopaedia of Georgia, its people, its history and its nature – a picturesque encyclopaedia, free in its method of expression.

Caucasian panoramas, from the magic nocturnal view over the Tiflis arsenal to the scorched mountains at the foot of Mount Shamil have remained engraved on my memory.

Thousands of lean peasants, cheerful vine dressers, poor, timid women, fishermen, haughty rich men with fat moustaches, Tiflis house porters with beards as shaggy as their untidy brooms, listless musicians crowded the Zdaneviche's house on Pirosman's somewhat dusty oil-cloths. From time to time someone mentioned one of his pictures and told some interesting story about it.

Pirosman's pictures represented chiefly people, but animals, too, occupied a special place: lions, gazelles, buffalos, giraffes, camels and mules – the painter's dumb friends.

Art always appeals to a man's heart and slightly wrings it. And man can never forget this light but manifest touch of the beautiful.

Man can never forget the feeling of being endowed with wings and spiritual plenitude which is bestowed upon him by one – only one! – line of a magnificent poem or by a picture which has survived several centuries in order to bring its beauty down to us.

If I had not known Pirosman I should have seen the Caucasus like a faint, underdeveloped photograph, without colours or shadows, without details or contours and without the blue mist of its semi-oriental and semi-European expanses.

Pirosman filled the Caucasus for me with the juice of its fruits and the sharpness of its dry colours. He made me feel at one with that country where joy is mixed with a slight and mysterious sadness. So do the eyes of Georgian beauties sparkle with gaiety and veiled sadness. Usually they easily and quickly vanish in the crowd, these beauties, though the poet's gentle appeal is addressed to them:

Oh, glance at me, genatsvalé![37]
Genatsvalé, please glance at me!

That summer morning was in no way different from the others. The sun rose as mercilessly as ever out of Kakhetia, scorching all around it, the mules tethered to telegraph poles sobbed as desperately as ever, men with black moustaches, looking as fierce as ever, went along streets with large cans, reluctantly shouting '*Naft*! *Naft*!' from time to time as they offered paraffin to housewives.

Everything was as it had always been: the roar of the Kura past the mills at the Ishak bridge, and the tinkly ringing of the half-empty trams.

Morning was still dozing in one of the lanes in Sololaki, and shadows were lying on the small wooden houses, grey with age.

The windows on the first floor of one such house were wide

open, and there slept Margarita, her eyes closed hehind her reddish eyelashes.

Mount David, the funicular railway and Griboyedov's grave could be seen high above Sololaki as through liquid glass. I used often to climb Mount David and the sacred Mtatsminda, and there saw the graves of the great Georgian poets Ilya Chavchavadze and Akaki Tsereteli.

Their lyric qualities combined with a tendency to sarcasm have given a particular depth to Georgian literature and surrounded it with the sharp and fine air of classical clarity.

Later, Mtatsminda became the Georgian necropolis. Among those buried there was our contemporary, the poet Titian Tabidzeh, remarkable for his gentleness and the power of his intellect.

But I am digressing.

Well, now, the morning would have been very ordinary if it had not been Niko Pirosmanishvili's birthday and if carts with a light and rare load had not appeared in the narrow lane in Sololaki.

The load was apparently so light that the carts did not even creak under its weight, but merely rumbled a little as they bounced on the large cobblestones of the street.

The carts were loaded to the top with cut flowers. They had been sprinkled with water and therefore gave the impression of being covered with hundreds of tiny rainbows.

The carts stopped at Margarita's house. The drivers spoke to each other in low voices as they took armfuls of flowers and heaped them up on the road and the pavement just outside the door.

When the first carts left and the whole street was strewn with flowers, more carts came to take their place. It looked as if the carts were bringing flowers here not only from the whole of Tiflis, but, indeed, from the whole of Georgia.

The smell of the flowers filled the entire street. The first housewives appeared at the windows. They hastily combed their tar-black hair and avidly looked at the extraordinary sight: cart drivers, just ordinary drivers, and not legendary camel drivers out of the Arabian Nights, were filling the whole street with flowers as if they were out to bury the houses in them up to the level of the first-floor.

The laughter of children and the loud comments of housewives woke Margerita. She sat up and sighed. Lakes of different aromas – refreshing, vivid, tender, gay and sad – filled the air. It could have been the aroma of celestial regions trailing after a star's slow progress over our earth at night or the smell of the germ long enclosed within the capsule of an ordinary flower seed and now freed by water, heat and the salts contained in the soil.

A noisy crowd had gathered at the entrances to the lane. People stared at the incomprehensible sight.

The inability to understand what had happened embarrassed people and therefore no one ventured to be the first to step on this flowering, knee-deep carpet. As to small children, they could well lose their way among these piles of flowers. And so women, in admiration of the mystery which had come up to their worn-out, familiar thresholds, familiar down to every crack after all the scouring they had so frequently to do, held their children firmly by the hand and did not let them go.

The variety of flowers was legion! It is useless trying to name them all.

Late Iranian lilac. There, every little cup concealed a drop of moisture, no bigger than a grain of sand, and yet spicy to the taste. Wild acacia with petals like shimmering silver. Wild hawthorn – its smell was the stronger the rockier the soil on which it grew. Tender, blue veronica, begonia and many different anemones. The graceful and beautiful honeysuckle in its pink mist, the red funnels of the ipomoea, lilies, poppies which always grow on rocks where a drop, be it never so small, of a bird's blood has once fallen, nasturtiums, peonies and roses, roses, roses, roses of all sizes, all smells, all colours – from black to white and from golden to pale pink, like early dawn. And thousands of other flowers.

Margarita, excited and yet unable to understand what it was all about, dressed quickly. She put on her best, her richest dress and heavy bracelets, carefully brushed her bronze-coloured hair and as she dressed she kept smiling to herself though she knew not why.

Then she laughed and her eyes were filled with tears, but she did not wipe them but merely shook them off. The tears flew off in

various directions and for a long time continued to sparkle on her dress.

She guessed that this celebration was arranged for her. But by whom? And why? And suddenly she remembered that that day was Pirosman's birthday. Could it be that it was he who had sent her all these mountains of flowers in memory of this half-forgotten day?

But why had he sent them on the day of his own birthday rather than hers?

Just then one man, lean and pale, ventured to cross the flowery boundary and slowly walked over the flowers in the direction of Margarita's house.

The crowd recognized him and there was a hush. It was the poverty-stricken artist Niko Pirosmanishvili. Where did he get all the money to buy these mounds of flowers? So much money!

He was walking towards Margarita's house brushing against the walls with his hands.

They all saw Margarita run out of the house to greet him – no one had ever seen her before so dazzlingly beautiful – throw her arms round his thin, sickly shoulders and press her head against his old, worn coat.

'Why,' asked Margarita, choking back her tears, 'why did you send me these mounds of flowers on your own birthday? I really don't understand, Niko.'

Pirosman made no reply. But with the whole of her being, with all her nerves, all the blood that coursed through her veins, Margarita realized how much he loved her, and she did what she had never done before: kissed him full on the lips. Kissed him for all to see – the sun, the sky and the simple folk living in the Tiflis quarter Sololaki.

Some people turned their heads away to conceal their tears. People thought that a great love would always find the way to the heart – however cold – of the beloved. Because everyone knew that Pirosman loved Margarita, but she did not love him at all, and only felt pity for his hard and luckless life.

The story of Pirosman's love is told in many ways. I have repeated one of these stories. I have told it briefly, without paying

much attention to its authenticity. Let that be the business of tiresome, pedantic people.

But there is one thing I must mention because it is perhaps one of those bitter truths – a short time later Margarita found a rich admirer and vanished from Tiflis, together with him.

26

To Every Man his Due

In Tiflis I lived among all sorts of people, but they all had one quality in common: each one of them was occupied with his own thoughts and his own work, each one of them spoke of his own interests and paid scant attention to others, especially those he considered alien to him. Babel had left for Moscow before even I had arrived in Tiflis, and the only man who thought along the same lines as I was Frayerman.

Among futurist writers and artists I was considered not so much an alien, as a 'savage' – hesitant and uninitiated.

This opinion was held of me probably because I never joined in any arguments and rejected equally the 'dark-grey' writings of people like Scheller-Mikhailov[38] or the 'syrupy' verses of such as Rathaus,[39] or the meaningless verbiage of others.

The only person I argued with was the poet Nikolai Chernyavsky a constant visitor in the Zdanevich house. He had fallen in love with Georgia and therefore referred to himself not as Nikolai, but as Kolau – the Georgian version of it.

His method of writing his poems is practically impossible to explain without a diagram. By and large, he would write the main text of the poem first – a fairly comprehensible text. But by dint of typographic devices and the use of different types one and the same poem became three poems.

This was achieved by printing all the verses together, but in three sizes of type. If you read only the words printed in the largest type, ignoring those printed in either the medium of the smallest type, you got one text.

But if you read the words printed in medium type, and omitted all the other types, you got another, entirely independent, text.

And if you read the smallest type (Brevier, say, or Nonpareil) you got an unexpected third variant.

To this brain-splitting and exasperating occupation Kolau Chernyavsky devoted practically the whole of his time.

To bring this method of writing poetry (called symphonic poetry) to the highest possible perfection it was essential to know all about types and printing. And Chernyavsky did – very well indeed.

The extent of Chernyavsky's knowledge in any sphere was remarkable, his judgment trenchant and intolerant, and his devotion to all the most 'left-wing' trends in art unlimited.

He was capable in pouring rain of ringing at the door of the Zdaneviches in the middle of the night, waking up Kyril and reading to him the latest poem by Khlebnikov[40] which had just reached him from the north. This, of course, involved waking up the entire household, including even old Zdanevich. In order not to let down the family tradition, the old man would invariably give his support to everything that was most 'left-wing' in art.

Chernyavsky, who had no family of his own, spent almost every day and all day at the Zdaneviches. He was continually telling us something, arguing or being indignant or in raptures about something. His constant listeners were Mrs Zdanevich and Maria. They not only tolerate Chernyavsky, but liked him, too, and felt sorry for him. Occasionally, he had epileptic fits. On such occasions I was called in to help.

Chernyavsky was an extraordinary conversationalist. He could not care less what the person he was talking to was doing provided he was listening to him. While Maria was tidying the rooms he would trail behind her, bumping into the furniture, and never stopping to draw breath. Or else he would stick around in the kitchen while Mrs Zdanevich was preparing her famous pilaf, and would suddenly interrupt his own flow of conversation about painting or Georgian spelling to give her valuable culinary advice.

From time to time Mrs Zdanevich and Maria would push Chernyavsky into my room and lock the door behind him. This in no way bothered Chernyavsky who, in complete disregard of all

around him, would turn the full flow of his conversation on to me.

But all in all he was a very mild and helpless man. He was cheated and ill-treated at every step. On such occasions his only defenders were the Zdaneviches.

And yet he was one of those odd people who not only make life more attractive, but also give it a firm foundation. Whenever Kolau failed to turn up for two or three days the whole life in the house went somehow awry and everyone felt bored.

All sorts of people dropped in at the Zdaneviches. They used to visit me, too, while they were there: the kind old Armenian poet Kara-Dervish, who published the full collection of his poetry printed on twelve post-cards, and the high-minded, friendly and wise poet Titian Tabidzeh, and the painter Terentyev, who had made the first attempt to bring the theatre out into the public square, and Vassily Kamensky and Chachikov (he had also moved from Batum to Tiflis) and the producer Shengelaya.

From morn till night the house hummed with talk. The only place where one could get some rest was my room. My most frequent guest was Mrs Zdanevich; later, Maria, too, became a visitor.

'I'm not disturbing you, am I?' she would say in her sing-song voice, and her eyes laughed.

She would sit quietly, without a sound, entirely unembarrassed by my presence, sewing or reading, with her head bent low so that her hair fell over her eyes, and would suddenly ask me something entirely unexpected, like, for instance, what was meant by a high in-step and how was it measured, or whether I had read Catulle Mendès's book *The Virgin King* and whether it was true that Pushkin had written marvellous verses about the famous Spanish dancer Lalla Rookh:

And like a wingèd lily, swaying
She made her entry, Lalla Rookh

Maria always left as if she had been frightened by something. Once she brought me a big folder containing some drawings. 'Are they yours?' I asked.

'Oh, Lord, no! They are the drawings of a very gifted artist, a genius perhaps, even. You'll see for yourself.'

She went, and I started examining the drawings made on any kind of material – on cardboard, on cigarette paper, on pages torn out of a school exercise book, on the end papers of a book binding.

My first impression was that Maria had brought me drawings by Delacroix. But no! They were just as expressive, but their subject matter had more variety.

The drawings were in pencil, and there was a number of water colours.

I looked for the signature, but apparently the unknown artist did not like having his name on his drawings. Only occasionally he wrote the name 'Ziga'. Ziga means Sigismund. Maria was Polish. I guessed that the drawings belonged to someone of her family.

Soon the truth came out. I discovered about the existence of a remarkable artist Ziga or Sigismund Waliszewski. He was Maria's elder brother. When the Mensheviks were in power he left Georgia for Poland, then lived in Paris for a while and came back to Krakow.

There he became the leader of the younger artists.

He loved nothing but painting, knew nothing but painting, looked at all that happened in the world from the point of view of a painter and believed that art alone could transform the world and make it beautiful.

He was a knight errant among artists, a zealot, implacably exacting both towards himself and towards others, a mature and clear-headed master of his art.

He was modest, simple, kind to people, and was cruelly mutilated.

Because of some serious illness which affected his blood-vessels he had both legs amputated. The remainder of his life he spent in great pain, incapable of moving, but without losing his serenity.

Waliszewski died like a true artist. He was painting frescoes on the ceilings of the Wawel Castle in Krakow. To enable him to do this he was winched right up to the high vaults of the great hall and he worked all day lying on his back.

At last his tired heart succumbed under the strain and he died of heart failure with his brush still in his hand.

He gained the love of young artistic Poland. He had never tried to drive beauty into its own particular corner, to enmesh it in theory.

He found it, welcomed it and appreciated it wherever it existed.

His artistic broad-mindedness was extraordinary. Even the most tolerant, militant and vociferous futurists and apologists of other, equally clamorous artistic trends, meekly recognized both his talent and his purity.

I have seen many works by Waliszewski. They were powerfully expressed and executed (no other definition fits) by a magic brush and a magic pencil.

The clarity and life-giving power of his design, of one, seemingly casual, stroke of his brush, the marvellous quality which enables an unfinished line to be finished off by the viewer as if it was there, sharp and definite, the radiance of joyful – though not necessarily blue – skies, which illuminated his drawings and his paintings, the sculptural quality of the faces, the personality of the sitter conveyed by his pose or by some small gesture, portraits in which the virile sketch was truer to life than the man it represented, the softness of the hair, of the clothes, of the lighting, of the stirring leaves, the festive eyes so close to the viewer's, the rapid, nervous drawing which, in an instant of time raised up before you a whole historical epoch from the carnivals of Venice to the procession of sazandari players to the Metekhi castle – all this stunned you and appeared all the more extraordinary because next to it, a lean, tall, very young man, almost a boy, with shy, grey eyes, looked down at you from his self-portrait.

He liked Delacroix and probably, as he worked, he always conversed with that sober and yet romantically inclined man.

He loved paint and its life on canvas no less than Delacroix and Van Gogh did. But at the same time his splendid realism impressed all who had seen his series of pencil portraits of all – without exception – officers and men of the First Caucasian Fusiliers.

During the First World War Waliszewski was called up and

served as a private in that regiment on the Riga front. In the course of a winter lull somewhere near Dvinsk Waliszewski almost as a joke drew a really stupendous series of portraits of his regimental comrades – from cook to machine-gunner and from some puny private in the reserve to officers of all kinds and ages.

I saw only a few surviving portraits. What can I say about them? It was a vast, bold, brilliant work by a generous master.

Waliszewski gave away practically all these portraits. Had they been assembled in one place they could, I think, in their naturalness and simplicity, eclipse the famous Gallery of the Heroes of 1812 in the Hermitage. The Hermitage collection represents a resplendent group of military aristocrats; here there were simple Russian soldiers, Tolstoyan peasants out of the 'Sebastopol Tales' in all the childish simplicity of their national character.

Later on in Poland, where he passed through the difficult test of being a fantastic success, Waliszewski remained, unlike many otherwise strong-willed individuals, consistent in his modesty and in his dislike of the political game and of attempts to make use of art in order to exercise power and encourage jingoism.

He gave a sharp rebuff to speculators who tried to create around him the nationalist mystique of a great, but exclusively Polish, artist. He considered that painting belonged to the whole world and that the commonwealth of true artists represented a more significant bond than common national interests.

The mere mention of Ziga's name in the Zdanevich family put a stop to all arguments, all quarrels, and restored everyone's equanimity.

'Ziga is a saint,' Mrs Zdanevich used to say. 'He has been left to us as hostage by the ages of Petrarch and Botticelli.'

She said that quite simply, without a shadow of affectation. Her words could be believed perhaps because Ziga's vivid world was as limpid as Botticelli's 'Primavera'.

There are flashes of intuition, apt comparisons and apt conjunctions of seemingly opposed ideas, which cannot be explained and, indeed must not be: the heart understands them in advance of reason.

27
Yet another Spring

Frayerman visited me almost every day. We both worked on newspapers: he on the *Zarya Vostoka* (*The Dawn of the East*) and I on a little railway newspaper with the awkward title *Gudok Zakavkazya* (*The Train Whistle of Transcaucasia*).

Sonya would occasionally drop in together with Frayerman, examine Pirosman's oil-cloths and say:

'These things are not for the likes of us, workers of the needle. But I sense in them the presence of human grief and beauty and, therefore, comrade Paustovsky, I don't deny that this is art too. There we agree, you and I, even though you are an intellectual and your good manners make me quite sick.'

Sonya had been a dress-maker and therefore insisted on referring to herself as 'worker of the needle'.

The Frayermans could not invite me to their home because they lived in a passage room in the house of some highland Jews. Sonya called them 'louts' and 'bulls'. For all her liberal ideas, she considered them renegades because they wore cherkeskas and dummy daggers, rode horses, traded in buffalo hides and had half-forgotten the Hebrew tongue.

Frayerman and Maria soon became friends.

One evening we were sitting in my room – Mrs Zdanevich, Maria, Frayerman, Kolau Chernyavsky and I. We did not switch on the light. For some reason we imagined that electric light would make the atmosphere too stifling.

Intertwined currents of cool and warm air streamed in from the

sun-heated bricks outside and wandered about the rooms in the transparent dusk of an early Tiflis evening.

In a neighbouring house a sentimental young man in a Russian shirt went on singing the same song over and over again all about the white lilies of Idumea.

'Where is this Idumea?' asked Maria.

'In Judea,' replied Frayerman. 'In my so-called lost fatherland. You know the verses:

And the guide said, Sir, I'm a Jew
And perhaps the descendant of Kings.
Look at the flowers on Zion's walls,
This is all that is left to us now.

'No,' said Kolau Chernyavsky, 'I haven't the privilege of knowing these verses, and am not even all that keen to discover who wrote them.'

'This has no importance,' said Frayerman. 'Something else is much more interesting.'

'What is it?' asked Maria.

'The fact that spring has come to Tiflis. But no one has noticed it yet.

'Let's make a trip to the mountains to-morrow,' suggested Maria.

Everyone agreed, with the exception of Mrs Zdanevich. She observed that the following day happened to be Easter.

'It's a very early Easter this year,' she added, and sighed.

Mrs Zdanevich went, and we all fell silent and hardly uttered a word throughout the evening. I had the impression that a dialogue, a conversation as if through sleep, as inaudible and vague as the trembling of leaves on trees at night was being carried on between Maria and me.

So began spring in Tiflis – silent, translucent, enchanted spring, such as all springs in the world always seem to us to be.

The following morning the three of us – Maria, Frayerman and I, took the road leading out of town to Kodzhory.

We walked very slowly, and just as slowly the amphitheatre of hills opened up before us and the horizon unrolled its misty expanse.

Far beyond, in the inaccessible distance, snowy peaks, piled one on top the other, hung high in the sky like clouds, entirely unattached to the earth below. Between them and the earth extended a layer of violet-coloured air.

Suddenly, I had a feeling of great joy, pride even, at the realization that I was at last in a far-off southern country, that everything there was unusual, that the mountains rose up at the watershed between two seas – the Black Sea and the Caspian – and that our lives had met on a patch of flinty road, far away from the places where we were born, that we were standing on the soil celebrated so often by Lermontov and Pushkin, by Niko Pirosmanishvili and Saryan.

For some reason, it was just there, high above Tiflis, on the side of the road, where anemones grew, that I suddenly felt an affinity with all that was of interest in the world.

I was struck by the thought that I had probably been lucky in life. Mainly, perhaps, because I did not expect a great deal from it. Of course I hoped that a great deal would, in fact, happen, and longed for it, but I could be satisfied with very little. Perhaps it was this attitude of mind that had enriched me beyond all else? Who knows!

From that day Maria became my guide through Tiflis. All the time I had the feeling of enjoying a kind of double experience of life. In other words, life was wonderful in itself, and at the same time it was doubly wonderful because a young woman, chastely and silently, was sharing it with me.

Everything in Tiflis acquired for me value and significance. Often I had the odd feeling that the whole of that hot city and the whole of that noisy, Asiatic crowd was nothing but a set for a sad and almost wordless play in which only two characters were taking part – Maria and I.

We went everywhere, we saw a lot, but all we always had money for was iced aerated water. We drank it out of glasses, with wasps crawling up and down their misted-up sides. The water seemed to me to be made of silver, and it made Maria's lips glisten in the sun like pomegranate juice. Her fragrant breath would suddenly reach my cheek or eyes. And in those brief moments I believed

that happiness must serve us and all men like a faithful slave.

We never mentioned love. Between us was stretched all the time a thin and slender thread which neither of us ever dared cross.

It was then I decided to leave Tiflis for Moscow. I assured myself that I should somehow get over the bitter sorrow of our parting, but should remain faithful and pure in Maria's memory of me.

Besides, I comforted myself with the thought that I was really longing for Russia, for Moscow, for any little stream were water lilies grew, for trees whispering in an aspen grove.

Suddenly my whole life took on a different aspect. Mrs Zdanevich spoke to me increasingly about mother and Galya and Moscow, and asked me what I was intending to do – 'after all, you can't in times like these, hang about provincial old Tiflis to no purpose.'

I realized that she saw everything, knew everything and was worried.

A sort of gloom seemed to pervade the house. Even the ordinary tempo of life was disturbed. Life was shot through with a sense of unease.

And I made up my mind to flee, mainly because the whole of my experience had taught me that I had no right to trust myself implicitly. Living among constant changes I was in my element, avoiding everything that could stop me and make me more reasonable. My father must have been right when he said to me in a hoarse whisper, as he lay dying:

'I fear . . . your weakness of character . . . will be your undoing.'

I realize that, properly speaking, I had all my life been drifting with the current. But strange as it seemed even to myself, the current was carrying me precisely where I wanted to go. Nevertheless, I blamed myself for this attitude of mine.

I soon tired of such reflections, and tried quickly to forget them and go back to a purely superficial and varied existene.

Thus I lived out my last few days in Tiflis. I told no one, not even Maria, that those were my last few days, although I knew it. I told no one because, very stupidly, I put my trust in fate: might it not press a button, and all obstacles would fall of themselves?

We had tramped all over the city; its gardens – the Botanical Gardens and Mushtand; its squares – including Avlabar on the outskirts, beyond the Metekhi Castle; the cathedrals of Sion and Amchiskhat, the banks of the Kura and the famous old dukhans (they were still functioning then) 'Simpatia', 'Sur Koura' and 'Tili Puchuri' which means 'Small house'.

In the square a crowd of young fellows, tradesmen and cabbies, standing in a close circle, chased a young wild boar all round the inside of it. It squealed and rushed about with fantastic speed, trying to break through the circle. Specialists of the game determined its speed with the help of a stop-watch. Gambling was in full swing.

Men, leaning out of dukhan windows, roared with laughter as they raised the stakes and sang boisterous, unruly songs.

Mules, standing placidly with their floppy ears, took fresh carrots from Maria's open hand. A warm breeze blew out of their shammy-leather nostrils.

Copper workers made such a din that they gave one a head-ache. We tried to go quickly past their stalls, covered with shiny scraps of tin, copper and zinc.

Chuvyaki hung in heavy clusters over the heads of the passers-by. The air smelled of leather, wine, vinegar and plum juice. Out of shops selling candles came the churchy smell of honey and wax. Round Sion Cathedral old women, as dry as sticks, sold immortelles. Young gypsies ran behind trams, gesticulating and dancing and rattling tambourines. Mushas carried aromatic bales of tobacco on their backs and shouted at the passers-by. Flower girls made up bouquets of flowers to suit the most capricious taste. On walls of dukhans were drawn the portraits of great men of all the world – Leo Tolstoy, Edison, Charles Darwin, Pushkin and Napoleon – but they all were swarthy Georgians with blue-black hair, dressed in cherkeskas with bandoleers, and huge daggers hanging at the side.

We went to the shady Mushtand Gardens where the flowers smelled of raw earth, and to the Botanical Gardens through which ran a mountain stream, sat on the steps of the ancient Amchiskhat Cathedral, listened to the roar of the Kura, the ringing of bells round the necks of horses, and never spoke.

Everything was said without words. And melancholy – tenacious and sharp – invaded the heart.

Just as this melancholy had reached its climax, I received an illusory release from it: the editor of *Gudok Zakavkazya* sent me on a long journey through Azerbaijan and Armenia. I travelled in a special train together with a commission of engineers. Their job was to investigate the condition of Caucasian railways.

28

This Mist of Ages

In the green gorge of the Pombak pass between Tiflis and Erevan the train went up the steepest possible gradients and took almost impossible curves. It creaked with all its rivets, springs and buffers and slowly, so slowly that the movement was almost imperceptible, it crawled along narrow bridges which made one dizzy as one looked down.

Everything about that railway was calculated to put a maximum strain on it. The train was pulled along with the help of double traction and a pusher.

The very staid and polite – courtly even – old engineers who were travelling in the train, told me and an old Armenian doctor who, like me, had joined their highly technical society entirely by chance, that after the construction of the railway the engineer who had built it was declared insane and put into a lunatic asylum. And in the meantime, the railway functioned perfectly well, even though it struck terror into the passengers' hearts.

Never before had I travelled in such comfort as in that special train.

I had a compartment to myself. I sat all the time on the folding table by the window and the train rushed me past canyons where leaves were stacked up in enormous piles and, warmed by the sun, smelt of turpentine.

Gaps between mountains revealed flowery valleys covered with dew. There were many of them, too many probably for any map, even a very large-scale map, to show them all.

These valleys seemed to me to be inhabited by very happy and

patriarchal people. They sat and smoked at the doors of their houses. Sun-tanned women carried fresh water in copper jars. Wide eyebrows set off their glittering eyes.

I was convinced that it was the surrounding nature that made these people happy. But a cursory look was unable to reveal any signs of happiness. One had to become all ears and eyes to hear the musical buzzing of bees, which accompanied the rap-tap-tap of the carriage wheels and the whistling and bustle of birds, to see the rapid play of light and shadow in the grass, and the vitrous sparkle of water in the mountain streams which constantly crossed the railway line.

I hung out of the window, observed and thought. I thought of Maria and really imagined that it was to her I owed all this feast of light, mountains and plants. As if she had brought me by the hand to all these places and was laughing with pleasure at my wonderment.

I did not even know how this part of Georgia was called. Perhaps it was no longer Georgia, but Armenia? Could well be.

I thought of Maria with tenderness and gratitude as if she really had herself created the Caucasus and presented it to me.

And the more I thought of her in that way, the more incorporeal did Maria become in my mind, the fainter did her voice sound.

And the train was taking me further and further away from Tiflis. Woods gave way to scrub and rock.

Suddenly among all that scrub I saw a sight which to me appeared fantastic: a large tent, a flag-pole and on it – the Norwegian flag. Horses were tethered to trees beside the tent, and sun-tanned men in check shirts and grey felt hats went about speaking to each other in cheerful voices.

All this looked very much like an encampment of characters out of Mayne Reid or Fenimore Cooper. I even gave a shout of surprise and rushed to the Armenian doctor in the next compartment.

'Don't worry!' said the doctor, who was smoking a fat cigarette filled with very strong tobacco. 'It's one of the groups belonging to Nansen's Food Mission. Those are not cowboys or skull

hunters, but accountants and doctors. Didn't you know that Nansen was working in Armenia?'

I did, but I could not imagine that 'in reality' it could all look so exotic.

In the night the train reached the plateau and the air became cold. And in the morning I jumped up when the first square of sunlight began creeping furtively from one corner of the compartment to the other.

I rushed to the window and stood stock still. A slight chill ran down my spine. My first impulse was to wake up all my travelling companions.

They were all asleep. The stillness was only interrupted by the light snoring of the well-bred old men.

I rushed from one window to another and succeeded in lowering one of them by seizing the leather straps and tugging at them with all my might. Sharpness of outline and purity of colour burst into the compartment together with the cold air; there, outside, a two-humped snow-covered mountain rose up to touch the very zenith of an ancient and virginal sky, shutting out half of it and the entire panorama. It was Ararat. It seemed to lift its snows right up to the sun. The sparkle of the snow filled the air with a shining mist.

Ararat! I just refused to believe that I was seeing it with my own eyes. All the myths of ancient times, all the fables of the distant past were incarnate in that gigantic mountain. The earth that extended at its mighty feet could not even be seen: it was hidden by a thick layer of the atmosphere. The peak of the mountain stood high above the world, piercing the mist.

I could not take my eyes off Ararat. I could neither eat nor drink. I was afraid that while I was doing this Ararat might vanish, disappear, become invisible.

The old doctor shook his head with disapproval and said something about my excessively impressionable nature, which was dangerous to health. But what did he know of anything, that old man with a butterfly tie!

Millenia stood close to me, were able to touch me. I breathed the air warmed by the rocks strewn in profusion all over Armenia.

The rocks received the heat from the enormous sun which here cut through the blue of the sky with assurance and power.

Our ancestors prayed to it, to that sun, that it might not reduce them to ashes – their land, their skin, their hair. Rivers of light flowed down on the earth and through their glitter came the sound of steeds neighing and of donkeys crying – the cry of the outraged.

Here was the meeting ground of religions, traditions, legends, history inseparable from poetry, and poetry tempered in the flame of history.

In this state of semi-delirium and semi-dream I arrived in Erevan. Even before I had seen the town I accepted it with the whole of my being. If nothing had been growing in Erevan but a single solitary dried up little blade of grass in a street or some vacant lot, this, even this, would have been sufficient for me to feel the fabulous quality of these places, their living antiquity and power.

At that time in Armenia they had only just started quarrying the light, porous rock known as artic tuff, coloured in soft hues – lilac, pink, bluish, terracotta, yellow, black.

Elegant houses were built of tuff in Erevan in the very first few months of the existence of the Soviet regime.

I used to walk past these as yet empty buildings and hear a quiet echoing within, inside the walls of tuff rock.

I passed the entire day in Erevan completely alone. Only towards evening did I return to the train. I liked my solitude in that unfamiliar country and scorched, half-empty town.

I liked it because no one asked me about anything, because I could think about Maria and because I could often look in the direction of the north – where the billowing evening mist was by now obscuring the roads to Tiflis.

In the night the train started again on its journey, south to Dzhulfa.

In the afternoon we crossed the famous white-hot Gorge of Serpents where a great number of snakes lay, sunning themselves on the rails and where trains were sometimes taken in tow, because of this.

The old doctor maintained that the snakes could crawl into the compartments through various openings. He threw the conductor into such a panic that he – the conductor – walked about the carriage armed with a small iron crow-bar and several times, without any need, let the air out of brakes because he was afraid the snakes might have got into them.

I saw several snakes cut in two by the wheels and still writhing. The conductor kept counting the number of snakes killed and was delighted.

I never left the window that day either. I felt sad, but happy.

The soil was only cultivated in patches. In the empty rocky fields I saw Armenian peasants looking more like partisans or rebels than peasants: nearly everyone had a rifle slung behind his back. This was their old custom of working fully armed because of the Kurds.

Before 1923, when all the events described in this book took place, Kurds used to raid and lay waste our lands on the Turkish and Persian borders twice a year, in the autumn to have adequate reserves of loot in the winter, and again in the spring to have enough food for the summer. The spring raid was considered a minor one and not as devastating as the one in the autumn.

Usually the Kurds crossed the Arax – the frontier river – on their lean horses. The Soviet authorities therefore, had outposts stationed at the Kurds' favourite crossing places, and we had guards on the train.

However, we saw no Kurds. We saw only the warm and swift river Arax with its pink, cloudy water. The water had the colour of the surrounding mountains.

Alexander the Great in the course of his Indian Expedition built a road across Armenia and bridges on the Arax. At one of these bridges we stopped and came out of our carriages.

The song of the desert larks rang like little trembling strings of a musical instrument in the sultry stillness.

Parched grass bristled like a yellow brush in the cracks of the vast slabs of stone with which the road was paved and large sand-coloured lizzards ran hither and thither.

The bridge had originally spanned the river in one immense

leap from one bank to the other. The middle of the bridge where the so-called 'key stone' used to be, had crumbled.

The elderly, well-mannered engineers stood looking at the bridge for a long time, picked off the rock-hard clay in between its stones, looked for traces of wooden supports, but found none.

'Unbelievable!' they said and shook their heads. 'Even our own Belelyubsky would not have built a bridge like that. A miracle of construction! A masterpiece!'

Dozens of lizards stared hard at the rare visitors and breathed heavily and excitedly. The wind drove coarse-grained dust up and down the bridge – the hot dust of the Persian land.

The torrid heat swathed the mountains in mist. On the Persian bank naked children stood on the roof of a low mud-brick house and the sun shone on their brown bellies as on so many little copper kettles.

'Unbelievable!' sighed the engineers. 'Supernatural!'

While the engineers were lost in admiration I sat down on a piece of hewn rock at the entrance to the bridge. The rock represented a lion's head, calm and dispassionate. Its eyes were yellow with lichen. This made the lion look alive.

I wanted to bathe in the Arax, but the old doctor and the engineers and even the conductor all shouted at me. Firstly, the waters of the Arax harboured some kind of worm, as thin as a hair; secondly, the waters of the Arax could give you leprosy; and thirdly, the Persian frontier guards – *askeri* (they lived, apparently in the same house as the children with shiny bellies) – could open fire on me.

The very word 'leprosy' had something ancient about it, I thought. It seemed to have the dull glitter of mica, like the hot pebbles on that river bank.

I did not bathe, but contented myself with putting my hands into the warmish water. When they had dried I noticed they were covered with a powder-thin layer of brown dust.

In the afternoon the train stopped in a gorge with steep slopes on either side.

'Well,' said the old doctor to me, 'here you'll have to sweat it

out for both of us. Up there' – he pointed straight up to the sky – 'there's a cathedral standing on a sheer cliff, but you can reach it only by a long flight of steps. They are cut inside the cliff, in a cave. I'm afraid no one but you, the conductor and the engineer Barkin – the most inquisitive man in Georgia – will venture to climb these steps. And in this heat, too.'

The old man was right. The three of us were the only ones to make the ascent.

The entrance to the cave was overgrown with prickly bushes. We forced our way through them and with the help of a small electric torch found the bottom steps of the flight of steps which went up and disappeared in the dark.

The steps were steep and worn. But the air was not stuffy or oppressive – a coldish wind blew behind us as through a chimney.

Soon we saw a light straight above us, and we reached, exhausted and cursing, the opening at the top of this subterranean passage and emerged in the apse of the cathedral, which was flooded with sunshine.

Swallows were flying about in that harsh, and in a way dead, sun under the dome of the cathedral. The gold haloes of the saints and the turquoise and purple of their evangelical robes made the frescoes glitter on the walls as if made only yesterday.

We went out into the tiny court-yard in front of the cathedral. The cathedral stood on the very summit of the sheer cliff. We could see plainly the currents of hot air which streamed past us, rose up to the sky and surrounded the cathedral with a tremulous, flickering wall.

Silence lay all around. The air was so pure that it seemed nothing could disturb it. No sound could possibly penetrate that thick layer of sultry heat, and envious imagination could only think of the cool waves of the Black Sea washing the shore some two hundred kilometres away.

We found not a drop of water in the cathedral. It was difficult to see what the inhabitants of that impregnable fortress could have had to drink.

I was lucky. A small book, covered with dust, lay on a window

sill in the apse of the cathedral. I took it. Or rather, I carefully ripped it off the marble window-sill and opened it.

The dry pages crackled. And I saw the Latin text of prayers and a dried up forget-me-not flower.

I took the prayer book. I wanted to make a present of it to Maria.

In the precincts of the cathedral, among the hard prickly bushes, lay many thin marble slabs decorated with an intricately carved design.

I picked up one broken slab of pink marble.

Chiselled on it was a bunch of grapes, a unicorn's head and an intricate design made up of Armenian letters. Whenever the sun shone on it the slab became diaphanous and as if infused with delicate blood like a child's hand held up against the light.

I took that slab with me. The conductor and I hauled it back to the train and put it in my compartment. It, too, I wanted to give to Maria. Had it been feasible I would have given her the entire cathedral, where the human voice had not been heard for centuries and where swallows were now angrily twittering all around us, insisting that we should leave as quickly as we possibly could.

I have a dim memory of Nakhichevan and its dusty mulberry trees, a town so far away from Russia that it was difficult to imagine that there was such a city as Moscow in the world.

I remember Dzhulfa with Persia beginning at the other end of a bridge; in the middle of the bridge, where our territory ended, sat barefoot Persian soldiers selling roach and tobacco.

On the return journey the train went slowly and waited for a long time at each station. The engineers found fault with everything, checked everything, examined every detail of station life.

The old doctor slept, while I, exhausted by the burning, oppressive heat, sat for days on end in station gardens in the inadequate shade of some old mulberry tree, read the only available book, which I had confiscated from the doctor – *Diagnosis and treatment of tropical diseases* – and occasionally dozed.

Now and again a goods train would lazily crawl into the station

and the atmosphere then became twice as hot because of the engine and the oily water which poured out of the tender.

I sat in these stations almost till the evening and admired my own patience. But to move was almost impossible.

The tin tank on the platform, containing what was left of the warm water, leaked and small lizards constantly ran up for a drink at the puddle near the tank.

With nostalgia I read notices on the goods trucks: 'Inspected at the Tver station depot' or 'Inspected at the Vladimir station depot'.

There, in Tver and Vladimir, rain was falling perhaps at that very moment in neglected town parks, genuine, quiet rain with no one to prevent it from hammering on the leaves, damping the soft earth on the flower beds with their petunias, and running down in lazy rivulets into the river Klyazma, famed of old for its limpid water.

Sometimes I would peer at the low hills on the horizon. They probably had no name. Indeed, why give names to endless humps of dry soil made of gravel and clay? What a credulous dreamer one must be to march, like Alexander the Great, into those melancholy deserts, with the complete assurance that beyond the dead horizon flow vast rivers – the Indus and the Ganges and dozens of others, carrying their dark, fathomless waters down to the ocean, among lilies, lotuses and temples fanciful as the edifices built by termites.

Sometimes a whirlwind would sweep the mountains, and pillars of red dust would then appear, like smoke, over their peaks.

Then the train began to climb out of the parched and burnt-out valley on to the plateau, where the wind blew and the nights were cold.

The railway followed the banks of the river Arpacay.

Once, at the end of the afternoon the train halted at the river's brink. On the other bank we saw basilicas, tiled Armenian domes and a complete absence of human beings. It was the ruins of the ancient Armenian capital, Ani – one of the real wonders of the world.

The engineers summoned from the Turkish bank of the river the officer commanding the frontier guards.

He came over to us across the hanging bridge, nonchalantly, showing off somewhat, smacking the patent leather leggings of his boots with a riding crop. Behind him came the soldiers, looking like dervishes or lepers – only some kind of copper discs on their shoulders testified to their military status.

The officer allowed us to have a look round Ani, but only before sunset. This decision of his evoked some excitement and joy among the soldiers. The smell of *bakshish* was in the air.

I boldly followed the officer across the hanging bridge to the Turkish side. Behind each of us walked an askeri, occasionally holding us by the elbow or stopping the rope sides when they began swinging a little too much.

The bridge was made of narrow planks tied together with rope. The gap between them was quite sufficient to allow a man to fall through it and into the Arpacay at the first false step.

The bridge shook, swayed violently, leaned over and with every step we took increased its rocking movement like a swing, threatening to tip us all out into the water. The water was about twenty metres below us.

I reached the middle and stopped – the bridge hit my heels and flung me aside.

A soldier seized me and shouted. At once the rest of the soldiers began executing some complicated dance on the bridge in order to stop it swaying. Red with the strain of it, eyes wildly staring, they shouted with all the fury of an attacking horde.

The firm earth on the bank seemed to me the best refuge from all mishaps, particularly earthquakes.

In Ani there were soldiers living in a small barracks, and a few shepherds in the town itself. They looked after sheep which grazed among the ruins, and slept at night, in any one of the basilicas.

What is Ani? There are, of course, things we cannot describe however hard we try. How can we describe a silence so complete that one can hear the rustle of sheeps' hooves in the distance and the sound of ripe seeds in the pods of dead and dried flowers rattling as in a child's rattle?

How can we describe the shadows of swallows' wings on porch stones in front of churches, overgrown with quite ordinary dandelions?

Only grasses, frescoes and a sky which looks like frescoes live in this deserted, wind-swept silence.

The clouds stand still, just as painted by some famous Italian master, and the sun casts a ray – Doré's famous, lonely, oblique ray, which he liked to depict – through a gap in the clouds.

That ray became from my childhood days part and parcel of pictures from the Old Testament. On seeing it over Ani's scorched squares I immediately realized that I was walking over places as ancient as the Earth itself.

The sun was setting. We had to go back.

Oh, with what delight I would have spent the night in those ruins, contemplating the revolution of the planets and finding it hard to believe my own good fortune.

How would I describe it all to Maria? What would I tell her of the constellation of the Great Dog, which served to guide pilgrims on their way to the Prophet's grave? There it was, low over the horizon, fiery, shining over vast areas of this Earth, so arid and yet so dear to us.

Perhaps it could be seen from the window of the room where Maria was sleeping. But for that the wind would have to throw back the curtain, Maria would have to say something quickly in her sleep and open her eyes for a moment, and the light of the stars would have to shine straight into her eyes to make her remember.

To go back across the hanging bridge no longer terrified me. Darkness made it easier.

The Turks shouted, a mule sobbed somewhere, bidding us farewell and the smell of wormwood seemed to me the most wonderful smell in the world. It was the smell of wanderings and bitterness. So I thought then and immediately cursed myself for being a snivelling symbolist.

29

It's All a Figment of Imagination!

The train took the whole night to go through the Pombak Gorge. The gorge seemed to consist of solid darkness. But from time to time the darkness was pierced by dozens of lights, became buoyant and weightless, and lamps lit up the reverse side of innumerable leaves of every shape and form.

I could not sleep. I decided definitely to stay in Tiflis. It seemed to me impossible to live away from Maria. I was ready to agree to everything – let her never so much as glance at me, yet I might hear her voice somewhere in the distance, in the morning perhaps, or in the afternoon or in the evening. At least the same sky would stretch over us both, and the same cloud, say the one there, looking like a knight's helmet with its visor down, would be seen equally by her and by me.

The train reached Tiflis at noon, the most unbearable time of day, when the heat turns all colours grey and makes the air dirty.

I felt all tensed up while sitting in the cab on the way to the Zdaneviches. The marble slab of marvellous beauty was lying at my feet.

The lane where the Zdaneviches lived was empty, melted by the sun. The windows of their house were shut. It was a long time before the door was opened after I rang the bell. This frightened me for some reason. The cabby carried in the marble slab with difficulty, put it on the landing and said: 'Whom did you bring this tombstone for? Granny or grandad? An expensive present, this, young man!'

I rang again. Mrs Zdanevich from behind the door asked:

'Who is this?'

I gave my name.

'Oh, I didn't expect you to-day,' she said.

An electric bulb was burning dimly in the dark hall, and in the light of that bulb a frightened giraffe on the wall was looking at me as if it wanted to warn me of some misfortune. All the rooms were dark.

Mrs Zdanevich was not expecting me that day. That I realized perfectly well. But where was Maria? Was *she* expecting me? Why was the whole place dark and nobody about?

'What has happened?' I asked.

'Nothing has happened,' replied Mrs Zdanevich, and I had the impression she smiled. – It's simply that nobody is at home. Maria has gone to Borzhom for two months. The doctors have prescribed a cure in Borzhom for her. And what's this tombstone?'

'It's a lovely thing,' I replied. 'It's five hundred years old, at least.

'Let the cabby take it out and put it on the verandah, otherwise everyone will trip over it here', said Mrs Zdanevich and went. On the threshold she turned and said: 'Particularly since it's all just a figment of your imagination. . . .'

I went into my room and felt that while I was away the room had died.

I examined the table. For some reason I was convinced that I should see on it at least a short note from Maria. But there was no note.

Outside, the familiar mellifluous tenor began singing about the lilies of Idumea. I glanced at my watch. It was half-past twelve – the day's watershed, when the day is at its blindest and sultriest.

'Idiot!' I said aloud, addressing myself to the mellifluous singer.

I wanted to cry, but managed, with immense effort, to hold back my tears. These unshed tears weighed on me as if the whole of Mount David was pressing on my chest and reducing my breathing to a hundredth part of its full capacity.

I went out. The sultry heat made me feel as if hot tea was being

poured over me. But I made no attempt to escape it and walked along the sunny side of the street. I crossed the trembling Vera bridge over the Kura, called in at the *Gudok*, said I was going to the north the following day, and would they please ask no questions, and went out. I went to Mushtaid Gardens and sat for a long time in the shade, first on a bench and then simply on the ground, which the shade had made cool.

From time to time I took a handful of cold earth and pressed it to my forehead.

I wanted to groan at the painfully obvious, perfectly clear thought which had never before entered my head, groan at the realization of my absolute, unfeigned, genuine and, therefore, hideous loneliness, the realization that nobody needed me – neither Maria, nor my so-called friends, nor myself.

As always, I felt a spasm in my throat. But what about mother? And Galya? Only they could forgive me. Had it been possible, I should have called mother, I should have asked her for help and protection. In fact, I may have shouted out something, for a bearded man with a huge copper disc on his chest, probably the park keeper, came up to me and said:

'Are you ill? Go away. There are children here, playing.'

And I went. Now I knew precisely what I had to do: go to Kiev, only to Kiev, to mother and Galya, and only that could save me.

And anyway, what had put it into my head, why had I imagined that Maria and I were tied to each other by some sort of common tension and common anxiety? Nonsense! Oh, I was tied to her, certainly, but she probably never so much as suspected it. It was all imagination! Nothing but a figment of my own imagination! All right, so be it!

The Tiflis railway station was not far from Mushtaid Gardens. I went there, bought a ticket to Borzhom and boarded a local train.

I did not look out of the window and merely noticed that the train was going extraordinarily rapidly, so rapidly that it was difficult not to fall off the slippery wooden seat.

I got out in Borzhom, immediately bought a ticket for the

return train and was back in Tiflis by the evening. All I saw in Borzhom was the station square.

The door was opened by Mrs Zdanevich.

'Have you eaten anything?' she asked.

'Yes. . . . Thank you. . . . I'm off to Russia to-morrow. I'll see you in the morning to say good-bye and pay you whatever I owe you.'

Quickly I entered my room and locked the door from the inside. The sentimental idiot was again singing about the white lilies.

The giraffe looked down from the wall in fear and alarm and it seemed to me that his lips were trembling like those of children about to burst into tears.

I lay down on the divan without bothering to undress. Something rustled under the cushion. I lifted it and saw a written note. It was from Maria. It consisted of one phrase only:

'Bless you. Good-bye.'

All the way to Kiev I thought of those words and tried to explain them to myself. Anyway, they brought me not a grain of comfort. 'It's all a figment of my imagination!' I repeated mechanically.

Yes, but what was to be done about it, if life without some figment of the imagination was not really possible?

Notes

1 *dukhan:* inn or pub in Georgia.
2 *cherkeska:* a cossack-style uniform, which is the native dress of all Caucasian tribes.
3 *lezghinka:* Caucasian national dance.
4 Alexander Odoyevsky (1803–1839): Russian poet, died in the Caucasus.
5 Shamil (1797–1871): Imam, leader of Daghestan's protracted, but unsuccessful War of Independence against Russia.
6 Alexander Bestuzhev (pseud. Marlinsky) (1797–1837) Russian writer killed in action against Caucasian tribesmen.
7 Michael Lermontov (1814–1841): Russian poet.
8 *batono:* Sir (Georgian).
9 Isaac Babel (1894–1938?): Russian short-story writer; died or was killed in a concentration camp in the USSR.
10 *katso:* man (Georgian).
11 Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-revolution, Sabotage and Speculation – better known as the Cheka, later OGPU and later still the NKVD.
12 Isaac Levitan (1861–1900): Russian landscape painter.
13 Ivan Bunin (1870-1953): Russian writer.
14 The Native (or Wild) Division of the Imperial Russian Army had its troops recruited from among the Caucasian (and, to some extent, Central Asian) tribes.
15 *bubliks:* Russian ring-shaped, rather hard rolls.
16 *sazandari:* Wind instruments.
17 *lavash:* Caucasian pastry.
18 *Kala mera:* Good morning (Greek).
19 *Po-grecheski:* Russian for 'à la grecque'.
20 RTA: Russian Telegraph Agency.
21 Lieutenant Schmidt: ringleader of a mutiny which became the subject of the film *Battleship Potemkin.*

22 'Going to the people' movement: the phrase generally applied to the late 19th-century attempt made by groups of young intellectuals to get to know the peasants by living and working among them.

23 Populism: (*Narodnichestvo*): Russian revolutionary movement favouring rural type socialism. Its origins date back to the third quarter of the 19th century, and are associated with the 'going to the people' movement.

24 Constantine Balmont (1867–1943): Russian symbolist poet.

25 *kheruvim:* Russian for cherub.

26 *tamada:* half jester, half master of ceremonies or even compère at Caucasian feasts and gatherings.

27 NEP: Lenin's New Economic Policy which permitted some measure of private trading and ownership.

28 *giaours:* non-moslems.

29 Dahl's Dictionary of the Russian Language.

30 Second-Lieutenant Kizhé: story by Y. Tynyanov (1894–1943). A slip of a clerk's pen misleads the Russian Emperor Paul into believing in the existence of a Lt. Kizhé. Fearful of the consequences to themselves if the misunderstanding were ever revealed, the military authorities report regularly to the Emperor on the fictitious Kizhé's successive promotions, marriage etc. When Kizhé becomes a general the Emperor demands to see him, but is informed that Kizhé is dangerously ill. Shortly after, his death is duly reported and an impressive funeral is staged with an empty coffin paraded through the streets.

31 RSFSR: Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic. The Soviet Union assumed its present name of USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – in December 1922.

32 *chuvyaki:* Caucasian soft leather bootees.

33 *genatsvali:* old chap (Georgian).

34 *matsoni:* Georgian yoghourt.

35 Suprematism: name given to his particular style of abstract painting by Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) who introduced it in Russia before the Revolution.

36 Natalia Goncharova (1882–1964) and Michael Larionov (1882–1965): Russian painters familiar to Western ballet audiences for their stage décors, executed mainly for Diaghilev.

37 *genatsvalé:* darling (Georgian).

38 Alexander Scheller (pseud. Mikhailov) (1838–1900): Russian novelist.

39 Daniel Rathaus (1868-?): Russian poet.

40 Victor (Vélemir) Khlebnikov (1885–1922): one of the founders of Futurism in Russian poetry.

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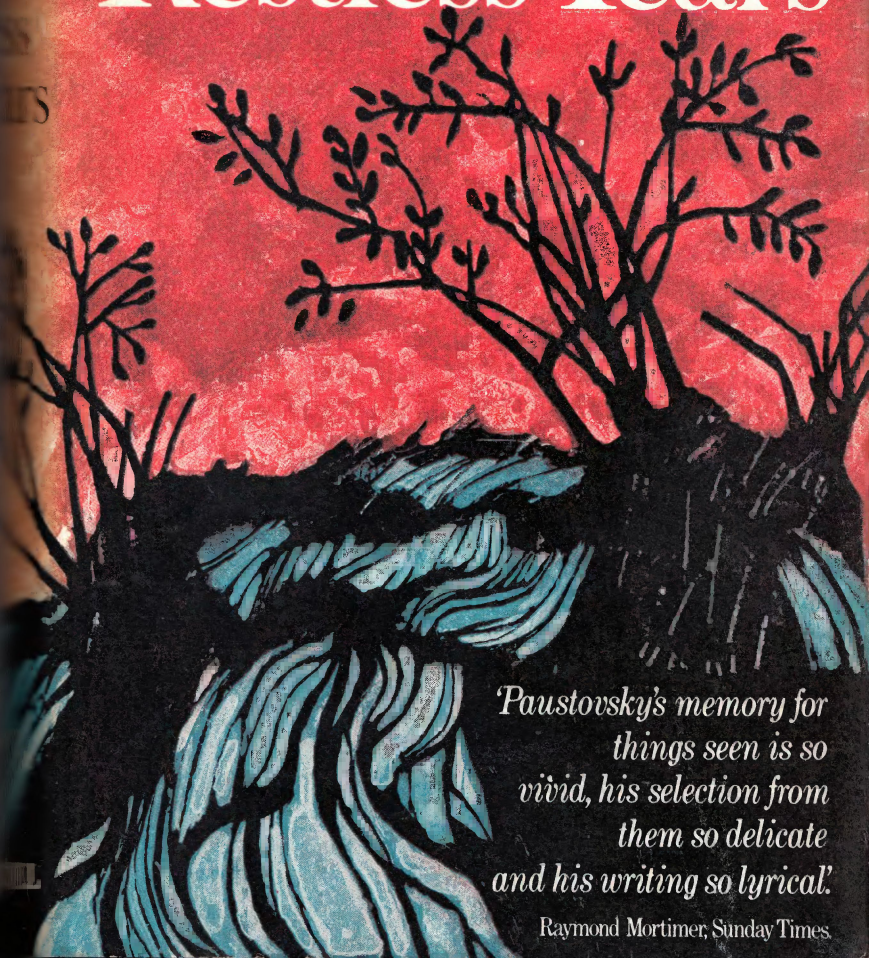

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The Restless Years

KONSTANTIN
PAUSTOVSKY

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Kyril FitzLyon

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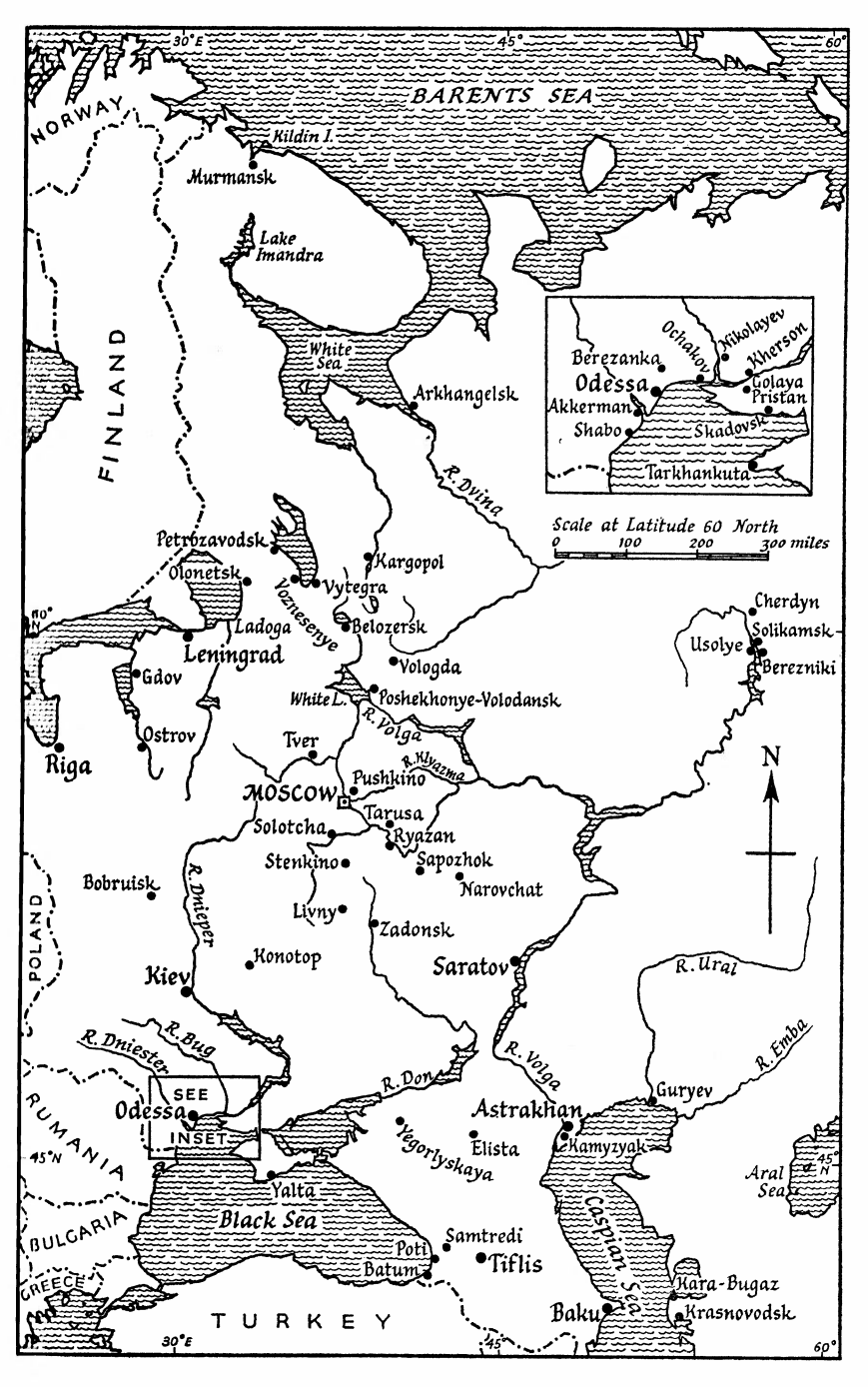
The weight of memories is crushingly oppressive:
My earthly life will make me weep in heav'n.

MARINA TSVETAYEVA



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White L.
Poshekhonye-Volodansk
R. Volga
Ostrov
Riga
Tver
R. Klyazma
Pushkino
MOSCOW
Tarusa
Solotcha
Ryazan
Stenkino
Sapozhok
Narovchat
Bobruisk
R. Dnieper
Livny
Zadonsk
POLAND
Konotop
Saratov
R. Ural
Kiev
R. Bug
R. Dniester
R. Volga
R. Emba
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Odessa
Astrakhan
Guryev
RUMANIA
Yegorlyskaya
Elista
Kamyzyak
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Aral Sea
Yalta
Black Sea
BULGARIA
Caspian Sea
Samtredi
Poti
Tiflis
Batum
GREECE
Kara-Bugaz
Baku
Krasnovodsk
TURKEY
N

I
The Last Meeting

I took a long time to get to Kiev from Tiflis.

The train reached Kiev by late afternoon. The spring was in full bloom, chestnut trees were in flower. The domes of St Vladimir were aflame with the warm glow of sunset, Kreshchatik Street resounded with the clamour of the smart and the fashionable. And the little room occupied by Mother and my sister Galya seemed to me all the more miserable and bare.

Over two years had passed since I had left Kiev for Odessa first and then for Tiflis. In the course of these two years Mother and Galya had become older and more serene.

I had taken every opportunity to send Mother money, but was always tortured by the thought that there was very little of it and it reached her only intermittently. But she did not complain. I realized how much stoicism there was in her character.

'Kostik,' she said after the first tears and the first chaotic questions were over. 'Galya and I have found an excellent way of living without great expense or unpleasantness.'

'What kind of way?'

'Have a look at the room; you'll understand.'

I examined the room. Its walls were hospital-grey, the furniture pathetic: two spindly iron bedsteads, an old cupboard, a kitchen table, three wobbly chairs and a mirror on the wall. All this had a kind of grey bloom on it, as if covered with dust. But there was no dust. The things had acquired that grey colour through old age and constant polishing.

'You know,' said Galya and smiled a weak smile in the direction of the window, with the sunlight coming through, 'you know, Mother and I have even done some repairs.'

I had not yet had time to ask Mother in confidence about Galya's eyesight, but as I observed her, I realized that she was really blind, completely blind. Mother looked significantly in Galya's direction, hastily pulled a small handkerchief out of the sleeve of the old knitted jacket she was wearing, and pressed it to her eyes.

'Mother,' asked Galya nervously, 'what's the matter with you? Are you crying?'

'It's happiness,' answered Mother in a faltering voice. 'Kostik has arrived and we are all together again. We are not alone any more, you and I.'

'Kostik has arrived,' repeated Galya slowly. 'He has arrived! My brother,' she added hesitantly, as if she were introducing me to someone. 'Oh, yes – my brother!'

She fell silent for a moment.

'You know, Kostik, Mother and I had long arguments about what colour to paint the walls. Then we painted them orange. Attractive, isn't it?'

'Very attractive,' I said, looking at the walls painted a cheap, grey colour. 'Very.'

'Mother says that even on a dull day we have the impression of having the sun here. Isn't that so?'

'It is,' I said. 'The walls are a very bright, gay colour. However did you manage to find such good paint?'

'I don't see anything any more,' said Galya and again smiled, not in my direction, but in some other, 'but I feel warmth simply breathing out of these walls.'

She came slowly towards me, holding on to the crude kitchen table as she did so. I got up to meet her. She touched my fingers, passed her hand along my arm up to my shoulders and touched my face.

'Oh,' she said with a laugh, 'you haven't shaved. I've pricked

my fingers. I don't make rag flowers any more; don't see well enough. The woman next door, who does knitting, gives me yarn to roll into large balls, these days. She pays me two roubles a ball.'

'While Galya rolls yarn into balls I read to her,' said Mother. 'Now you realize how we live, don't you, Kostik?'

'I do,' I replied trying not to betray my emotion. 'I do, I realize everything.'

'We have sold all our superfluous things,' said Mother, 'all the useless things.'

'In the Zhitny Market,' added Galya. 'What do we want a *samovar* for, for instance? Or old velvet-covered albums with family photos? We had four of them. Mrs Kozlowska had kept them for us for years.'

Mrs Kozlowska was a quiet old woman, a friend of my mother's of many years' standing.

'I've kept the actual photos,' said Mother, almost apologetically.

'Mother had luck. She never imagined anyone these days would buy those albums.'

'And guess who bought them,' interrupted Mother, she couldn't help laughing. 'A monk from the Bratsk monastery. He took all four albums. He needed them. Guess what for, Kostik?'

I couldn't, of course.

'Velvet book covers are very heavy,' explained Mother. 'They made excellent covers for Bibles, sumptuous really. The monk sold them off to village churches, and we got rid of all that trash. There's less worry this way. I've always said, all my life, that things consume our energies and are a torment to us. They make us work for them like charwomen. Anyway,' she went on, as if cutting short an argument that had gone on for too long, 'life's easier like that. We've reduced our requirements to the minimum.'

Mother said this with just a shade of pride in her voice.

'And what happened to the old woman?' I asked Galya. 'The one who used to buy your flowers for the Baykov cemetery?'

'She died, the old girl. I made a wreath for her grave out of nothing but daisies.'

'A marvellous wreath,' said Mother with a sigh. 'The last one. I'll warm up the dinner now, and then you will tell us all about yourself. All right? In the meantime you two can sit in Amalia's room. Or out on the balcony, in the fresh air.'

I took Galya's arm and led her out on the balcony, through Amalia's room. Amalia was not at home. Galya walked across the floor as if she were crossing a shallow river, feeling the bottom with her foot.

We sat on the balcony. It looked out over the Botanical Gardens. From time to time a tram would crawl squeaking along the Bibikov Boulevard. The square in front of St Vladimir's Cathedral had long spring grass growing between the cobblestones.

The day was drawing in. The lights of the setting sun, reflected in innumerable window panes, was flooding the street.

'Kostik,' asked Galya, 'have you really published several stories?'

'How do you know?'

'Gilda came to see us, one day – Emma Schmukler's sister. You remember her?'

'Of course I do – tall and ungainly.'

'Oh well now, they say, she is a beauty. You wouldn't recognize her. It was she who told us. Why didn't you send them to us?'

'I've brought them with me.'

'Well then, listen,' said Galya conspiratorially, 'you put them on Mother's bed, on her pillow, but don't say anything to her. It's her only ambition now, you know – that you should become a real writer. The other day she said about you that if you do only a little bit of good in this world you will thereby redeem – that's exactly how she put it: "redeem" – all father's faults. Tell me please, about the things you write, can they help people, so that they will suffer less? What do you think?'

The front door banged.

'Hide,' said Galya quickly. 'It's Amalia. She *will* be surprised!'

I hid behind a tub with a large oleander. Amalia came in, tired. She stopped in front of the looking glass, raised her arms and smoothed her hair which was as beautiful as ever.

'I'm sitting in your room,' said Galya, 'because Mother is frying rissoles. And our room is filled with the smoke and the smell of it.'

Amalia smiled and asked:

'And where is he?'

'Who?' asked Galya nervously.

'Where is he?' repeated Amalia. 'Kostik. His cloak is hanging in the hall.'

Then she saw me, seized me by the arm, dragged me out into the middle of the room, threw her arms round my neck and kissed me several times firmly and loudly, the way peasant women do.

I did as Galya told me: in the evening I put three stories of mine, cut out of the newspapers in which they had been published, on Mother's pillow while she was fussing about in the kitchen. I felt nervous, of course, and sneaked away to town. As I wandered about the streets I tried to guess whether Mother had read the stories yet or not. At last I could bear it no longer and went home. The door was opened to me by Mother. She took my head in both her hands and kissed me on the forehead. Her eyes looked as if she had been crying.

'If you only knew,' she said, 'the things I've just read! Thank you, Kostik. In the name of all of us – your father and your brothers and our poor Galya.'

Mother could not speak. She sat down on a stool in the hall.

'Give me some water,' she asked.

I brought her a cup of water out of the kitchen and let her drink it.

'And it's my son who did it,' she said almost in a whisper and patted my hands. 'My Kostik!'

'Oh really, Mother!' I said trying to calm her down. 'I shall stay here with both of you.'

'There's no need for that!' she said firmly. 'Go your own way. Only don't, please don't, forget us.'

Suddenly she collapsed and burst into sobs. I took her in my arms and pressed her to my heart.

'If your father were alive,' she said, swallowing her tears. 'If only he were alive! How happy he'd be. He was a wonderful man, Kostik. The most wonderful man in the world. I've forgiven him everything. And you forgive him everything, too. You had a hard youth. I am not even afraid to die now. But promise me you will look after Galya if I die.'

I promised her this, but things turned out entirely differently from what Mother had expected. She did not even see my first book. Life was to prove harsh and unfair in its treatment both of her and of Galya.

One summer's day I went off to Poti, in Colchis, in preparation for writing a book about the subtropics. In Poti I got typhus, the so-called 'blue' variety, spent a long time in a hospital bed, fighting against death, and during that time Mother died in Kiev of pneumonia. Galya died a week later. Without Mother she was unable to live so much as a few days. What she died of nobody knew, and I failed to discover what it was.

Amalia buried mother and Galya side by side in the Baykov cemetery among the dense crowd of dry, neglected graves. Later with great difficulty, I found their graves, overgrown with yellow nettles – two graves which had merged to form one hillock, bearing a warped tin plate with the following inscription: 'Maria Grigoryevna and Galina Georgievna Paustovsky. May they rest in peace!'

It took me some time to decipher this inscription which had been washed away by rain. A pale, diaphanous blade of grass grew out of a crack in the tin plate. It was a strange and bitter thought that this was all! This little blade of grass was the only monument to their hard life. It was like Galya's wan and sickly

smile, like a tiny tear from her blind eyes, suspended in her lashes, so tiny that nobody would ever see it.

I remained alone. Everyone had died. My mother who had given me life – a life not vain or useless – was lying here beneath the Kiev clay, in a corner of a cemetery, next to the railway line. As I sat beside the grave I felt the earth shake every time the heavy trains rushed past. Even in her grave Mother must have worried about me, just as she worried when still alive. She would often look me straight in the eye and ask:

'You are not hiding anything from me, are you, Kostik? Don't you ever do that. You know, surely you know, that to help you I am ready to go to the ends of the earth.'

2
The Silent Fields

And so in August 1923 I left Kiev and went back to Moscow.

I had enough money for a month of semi-starvation. I should have looked for work in the world of Moscow newspapers. But instead, worn out by the Transcaucasian heat which I had just experienced, I dreamt of the damp woods and cool rivers of Central Russia, dreamt, indeed, of burying myself, if only for a short time, in some forgotten village. Besides, before starting a new epoch in my life, I wanted to say farewell – and this time for ever – to the old village life I knew through personal experience and not just out of stories by Chekhov and Bunin.

It was chance that helped me to say farewell. In Moscow I went to live in Granat Lane in the flat of my old landlady where I occupied the room of another tenant who happened to be away on some official mission. Another occupant of the flat was my neighbour of the year 1917 – the freckled medical student Lipochka. She was quite unable to reach her finals.

Lipochka's father was a village priest somewhere near Ryazan. Lipochka tried hard to hide this fact, but I had discovered it, quite accidentally, back in 1917. In my presence Lipochka referred to her father in a bantering tone as 'my little priesty'. He was the man I went to stay with, on Lipochka's advice, for two or three weeks.

The river Oka divides Ryazan Province into two distinct parts: the north – all woods and marshes, and the south with its fields and gullies. Yekimovka, the village where Lipochka's father

lived, was situated in the south, among endless fields.

I felt sorry to go to a part of the country bereft of all forests. But no sooner did I step out of my train – I travelled by goods truck – at a little whistle-stop called Stenkino, on the other side of Ryazan, than I forgot all about my grievance. The warm rye-laden breeze blew in my face. The silence of the fields, untouched by a single sound apart from the distant hoot of the departing train, enveloped me.

I stood for a while under the old elms on the platform and sniffed the long-forgotten smell of tar coming from cart-wheels. A cart was tied to one of the elms. A grey gelding was dozing between its shafts, its dry skin occasionally twitching. It was Lipochka's father who had sent the cart to fetch me. The driver – a young lad answering to the name of Vlas, aged about twelve, with a pock-marked face and a sullen expression – never ceased lashing the gelding's hollow sides with his whip. To all my questions Vlas gave but one answer: 'How should I know?'

For a long time we drove in silence. At last Vlas plucked up courage and said:

'Our priest, Father Peter, is a widower. Old and a bit deaf. The chairman has lent him this gelding. It's the Poor Peasants' Committee's.'

Soon, above the rustling ocean of rye rose the white bell-tower and the green dome of the church. The cross on the dome was leaning to one side and was on the verge of collapsing altogether. Sparrows were sitting on it, quarrelling and pushing each other.

Father Peter's house stood just outside the village, next to the church. It was so overgrown with elder, so buried under bushes of lilac that only the porch was visible. Father Peter came out, wearing an old silken cassock. Small, with thin little plaits of grey hair at the back of his head, he kept peering up at my face with his small, watery eyes and lisped:

'Thank you. It's kind of you to visit an old man. Not much of a life we have here. All the same, "Home is home be it ever so

lowly," as the saying goes. You'll have a good rest here. The air is rich in these parts.'

And so I took a room in the house where the deaf old man was busy rootling about all day.

'I really don't know,' he would say in conspiratorial tones, 'why they leave me alone. Is it out of regard for my old age? Or is it because the parish is beggarly, all paupers here? The most miserable parish in the entire Ryazan diocese. Potatoes and whatever the garden gives – that's all I have to live on. The apple trees are all past their prime. The fruit they bear is tiny and wormy; and the price it fetches, practically nothing. Lipochka helps, of course; but for her they would have trundled me off to the churchyard long ago.'

The house was dark and cool. The cleanliness of old age had obviously long taken its abode there. The scoured, unpainted floors looked grey. Rooms smelt of icon oil. Little bunches of St John's Wort were stuck behind the icons in their cases. There were no books, except for a breviary and a shabby and much-read novel by Zasodimsky, *The Smurino Chronicles*. The ink in its little pot was covered with white mould.

The main presence in the house, and the fields around, was absolute silence. Occasionally it was broken by the hum of a bumble-bee. It flew round the rooms as if it were the landlord. After buzzing and bustling to its heart's content it would fly with relief out of an open window into the heat and the blueness of the sleeping fields.

The bumble-bee would fly away and silence would once again reign supreme. Father Peter would quietly clear his throat and start in a high trembling tenor: 'The pains of death have seized me and the torrents of lawlessness have made me afraid.' But all at once he would remember my presence and stop, fearing he might annoy me. And again, silence. Sometimes the wind would make a sudden sound as it blew in the garden and raised the chintz curtains in the windows.

I found rest in that poor abode. My thoughts dwelt long on all

that took place around me. I felt uninterrupted joy from being close to the land, to Russia. I felt too, then, that she was really *mine*. A great destiny and great storms lay in store for her. This was clear to everyone, even to Father Peter, who was not very bright, and I knew for certain that the charm of her fields, of her skies, of her wide open spaces, would always remain wonderful and unchangeable.

The house was surrounded by a garden which had grown as it thought fit, and was therefore extraordinarily picturesque. Huge burdocks, like elephant's ears, grew next to nettles as tall as a man. In the daytime the leaves in the garden hung down limply. It was a sultry August. I welcomed every bit of shade given by the clouds majestically rolling along, snow-white and vast in the distant sky. However, the heat was soft, not exhausting and sinister as in the Transcaucasus. And then how luxurious, shady, enchanted and filled with the breath of grass the garden became towards evening! How fresh were the billows of air that filled it at night and remained in it till the morning! The sunset glowed mistily at the end of the garden. The song of the shepherd's horn died slowly beyond the river Pavlovka.

Father Peter would light the kitchen lamp, and soothing night took the place of day. Perhaps the best thing in Yekimovka was the nights – melodious and as if created specially to show off the charm of women's and children's voices calling calves and geese. Every evening our neighbour's daughter, Lusha, would drive a young steer with moist chestnut-brown eyes into the yard of Father Peter's house. Then Lusha would whisper 'Good evening' and run away to avoid questions. However, I noticed that her face flushed deep red every time. I noticed, too, her inquisitive glance dart out like lightning from under her dusty eyelashes. When Lusha had run away Father Peter would say:

'My god-daughter, you know. She has grown up in this desert like Mary, the King's daughter.'

One day, obviously because he had heard of my arrival, the archdeacon – a sly fellow – came to see Father Peter. His hair was

orange-red, he had a big nose, spoke in a hoarse falsetto and his cassock was torn over his stomach and his backside. He informed us at once that he had made a hole in his fence to enable him to creep up from behind and catch the boys stealing his apples. But he had made the hole a shade too narrow and in his hurry to wriggle through it he had torn his clothes.

At the sight of the archdeacon Father Peter was struck dumb. He merely nodded all the time, and agreed to whatever the archdeacon happened to say. And the archdeacon explained that great tact was essential to defend priests from all manner of ills and stay in good odour with the authorities. A little later Father Peter went off somewhere in the vicinity and brought back with him a bottle of somewhat cloudy home-distilled brandy. The brandy stank of paraffin-oil and rotting horse-radish. But the archdeacon washed down a boiled potato with two glasses of it and at once became tipsy and began talking rubbish.

'Next to our Lord Jesus Christ and the Church's holy saints,' he said belching, 'I have the greatest respect for the Bolsheviks. I like firm and resolute men. Especially since I'm myself famous throughout the diocese for my daring. I never waste words. Should some wretched little priest, like this one here, commit a sin of any kind all I do is to clutch him by the forelock and give him such a shake – just one – his legs fold up and turn to water. Then I give him another good shake and he finds his legs again! I take no other measures. Out of compassion.'

Father Peter seemed to shrivel up. The plaits at the back of his head were shaking.

'Now take, say, this deaf priest, Father Peter. What do you expect *he* can give? He hasn't got two brass farthings to rub together.'

Father Peter tittered.

'I have no sins,' he said nervously. 'I turned seventy the other day.'

'Of course you have no sins; your body is too infirm and your mind too weak.'

'You shouldn't be talking like this,' I said to the archdeacon. 'Father Peter is a good man. Why offend him?'

'He doesn't take offence,' said the archdeacon turning to Father Peter. 'See, he's nodding. Priestly humility enjoins him to submit with all meekness to hunger and obloquy. And you, young man, would do better to take up the defence of priests not here in Yekimovka, but in Moscow, in the Kremlin palace where the new Caesars look after the good of the people. Everything is good about the Bolsheviks, I approve of everything about them except the prohibition against the keeping of horses and the holding of horse fairs. No one knew more about horses than me, from Ryazan to Lipetsk. Not a single fair ever took place without me. No sooner would I be there than all the gypsies – horse-copers all of them – would disappear as if by magic. They'd get the smell of my fist all right. And you say – Bolsheviks!'

The archdeacon suddenly stopped, his head fell on his chest and a terrible snore escaped him. A few minutes passed.

'A real disgrace!' said Father Peter to me in a whisper. 'They will sweep him right away, the Bolsheviks will! They really will!'

'They won't!' said the archdeacon unexpectedly and calmly. He opened his eyes and sneezed with a deafening roar. 'Don't be so pleased, Father Peter.' He sneezed again. 'They may yet sweep *you* out of Yekimovka.'

The archdeacon sneezed for the third time, and the fourth, and soon made the little room ring and rattle with the Homeric noise.

When at long last he finished sneezing, he took a vast red handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his face with great thoroughness and said in a clear voice:

'Sneezing takes all the drunkenness out of me. Doesn't matter how drunk I may be, at the twentieth sneeze I'm sober. As a judge. That's a special gift.'

He got up and said goodbye to us. His farewell words to Father Peter were:

'Sit tight! No one will touch you. Neither church nor state. Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Mother will hear your wails and moans, Father Peter.'

The archdeacon left, and Father Peter took the large church door key and trudged off to hold a service, probably by way of thanksgiving for having got rid of the archdeacon.

I followed him, to have a look at what the church was like inside. I had not been in it yet. It was divided into a winter church and a summer church. The winter church was on the ground floor. It was heated in times of great frost. The summer church was accommodated upstairs, on the first floor. It was light, and now flooded by the sun. The watery frescoes looked pink in its rays.

Father Peter put on his stole and began the service. Being deaf he could not hear himself speak and therefore either shouted his prayers at the top of his voice or else mumbled them in a barely audible whisper, almost falling asleep as he did so.

I threw open the dry, dusty window, sat down on the window-sill – and there was the sky in front of me, looking as if washed with clear water. The clouds crowded in on one another from one end of the earth to the other. And as they swam along the sky's convex dome, they got a bloom of dove-grey shadow on them.

Father Peter's Mass took a long time. While he served it the clouds had piled themselves up into towers and darkness grew at the foot of these towers. Then a pale flash of fire lit them up to the very heart. A short gust of wind over the fields bent the rye to the soil. But the thunderstorm never came. August had probably lost by then its power to produce storms. They could no longer roll along the fields, carrying with them pillars of dust, glittering ominously and stamping the roads with large, heavy drops.

Just outside the porch a bony-looking peasant – Lusha's father, Nikifor – was waiting for Father Peter.

'A man – quite well off he is – wants to marry Lusha,' he said,

without looking at Father Peter. 'Give us your blessing for the wedding, father.'

'And who is he?' asked Father Peter. He was tired and his hands were shaking heavily while he was taking off his stole.

'A tailor from Storozhilov.'

'Young?'

'Well . . . fifty, about; not more.'

'A good man, is he?'

'God knows. Ordinary, like. Drinks a bit. His face isn't up to much, agreed. Pock-marked, you know. But then, what's his face got to do with it?! He is a widower, that's true, with two kids round his neck.'

'Is it a love match on her part?'

'Oh, God!' cried Nikifor. 'Of course I am sorry to offer her up in that way, you must realize it yourself. There's one thing though: he *is* earning money. A state tailor, he is. My old woman has got her teeth into Lusha: go on, she says, marry him, you must. And you know what my old woman is like. Has a grasping eye for all and everything.'

'I do know,' agreed Father Peter listlessly. 'However, it's your business, not mine, you are the parents.'

We came down the steps of the porch. Father Peter was plodding on, leaning on his stick for support. Once again a pale light blinked in the dark cloud.

'What do you think?' I asked Father Peter. 'Does Lusha love him, or doesn't she?'

'Love indeed!' replied Father Peter angrily. 'But it's time she got married, all the same. That's the way it is among peasants.'

Father Peter fell silent for a little and when he spoke again it was to say that they would be harvesting soon. New soviet harvesting machines were supposed to be coming from Ryazan. They would harvest the whole field as far as Stenkino in one day, people said. There was no end to the marvels God let us see in this world! In Yekimovka the work was done by practically no one but women. The men went off to earn money in the neighbouring

towns – Mikhailov, Ryazan, Pronsk, Kolomna, even Moscow. They came to Yekimovka only when work in the fields was at its height. Some would bring presents for their families. After their husbands' visits the women would walk about in new shoes, and the children blew little penny whistles and rattled rattles from morning till night. For women the work was backbreaking. After the revolution the allotments had grown, the land of the landlords and the monasteries had been taken over by the peasants and it was difficult to cope with it all. There was practically no machinery in existence. Grain and hay were harvested by hand. The entire village life was managed and directed by the Poor Peasants' Committee. It was obeyed without demur. Nevertheless, it was accepted practice to quarrel with the Committee's chairman, an ex-soldier nicknamed 'An Instant'. He did not recognize the existence of difficulties and he solved every problem quickly with the words: 'This we'll do in a trice! In an instant!'

It took me longer to part finally with the village than I had expected. Fearing the unknown, I delayed returning to Moscow. However, the time came when I had to go.

As far as Ryazan I had Lusha to accompany me; her mother had sent her to town to buy gauze for her wedding veil. All the way to Stenkino Halt Lusha and I walked across fields in total silence. Over her faded cotton *sarafan*[1] Lusha was wearing a tight black jacket; she had tied a white kerchief on her head hiding her plaits of fair hair, and, feeling very shy, almost never raised her eyes as she walked.

Bluish, cold clouds followed each other with monotonous regularity. The hem of Lusha's skirt brushed against the dry autumn grass. Only chicory and wild rowan – yellow as mustard – had not yet faded and were awaiting the autumn storms in vivid serenity. I was trying to remember it all: every harvested ear of rye, glistening like mica on the field of stubble, Lusha's every glance – quick, questioning and uncertain. It seemed to me she wanted to ask me something, but did not have the courage.

And I, frankly, was pleased that she was not asking me anything. What could she ask? Whether she should be getting married? I would have tried to dissuade her and would probably have told her much which she would not have understood. And if she had, it would have frightened her.

Everything about that simple girl, her rough hands, her quick smile, the way she inclined her face, submissive and tender, contained so much promise – vague as yet – of love for someone still unknown, but certainly not for the man to whom she was betrothed, that to walk beside her filled one with the sense both of sadness and of joy. Throughout our walk I wanted for some reason to look after Lusha, to protect her against the sharp wind which blew in our backs. The farther we went the more often did she adjust the blonde lock of hair under her kerchief.

In the train we settled down on wooden planks serving as seats in the cattle truck we were travelling in. The familiar fields crawled reluctantly past, the carriages rattled on along the rails. A young lad in a new cap made shrill hooting noises on a mouth organ. I got a splinter in my hand from the unplaned board of the seat. This scared Lusha. She carefully pulled it out and licked the little wound clean, just as a child would do.

We parted at the Ryazan goods station. The railway lines were strewn with husks of sunflower seed. Stokers, all covered with oil, walked about cursing and swearing. Jackdaws screeched in the limes by the level crossing. I shook Lusha's small, hard hand and she went without looking back. But as she went she kept nervously adjusting the kerchief on her ruffled hair. I wanted to call to her, but didn't. And then I waited for the train to Moscow for a long time and smoked cheap cigarettes.

Many years later I saw Lusha again – her face, and the whole of her, as lithe as a reed. It was terribly far from Ryazan, in Northern Italy, the flowering Val d'Aosta, hemmed in by snowy Alpine peaks. Lusha was standing at a cross-roads, on a high stone plinth, stooping slightly, smiling and looking at the flowers someone had placed at her feet. The unknown sculptor,

who had modelled this madonna out of wood, had painted her cheeks a pale red. The madonna had the shy glow which I had observed on Lusha's face.

The wind from the mountain blew straight in her eyes and moved the folds of her dress. She did not have a child in her arms. She was still innocent. And this charm of innocence turned the Italian madonna into a friend of the peasant girl Lusha from Yekimovka village in the Ryazan province.

3
'The Fourth Strip'

After my return from Yekimovka I wandered for a long time from one Moscow editorial office to another in search of work. One day, in the *Gudok*[2] office, I met Victor Shklovsky.[3] He stopped in front of me and said irritably:

'If you want to write tie yourself with leather thongs to a writing table. You must obey your elders!'

'I haven't got a writing table.'

'A kitchen table then!' he shouted and disappeared next door.

The words about the leather thongs Shklovksy said merely at random, for no particular purpose. We were not yet acquainted at the time.

The room into which Shklovsky had disappeared was occupied by the gayest and the most caustic men in the Moscow of those days – fellow-employees of *Gudok*, Ilf,[4] Olesha,[5] Mikhail Bulgakov[6] and Hecht.[7] Bending over their tables and laughing occasionally, they were writing something rapidly on narrow strips of newsprint. This editorial room bore the strange name of 'The Fourth Strip'. A venomous wall newspaper *Vopli i Sopli*[8] hung on the wall in the passage. The last (fourth strip) page of the *Gudok* newspaper was prepared in that room. The 'strip' contained readers' letters, but published in such guise that not a single reader could recognize his own letter. The staff on 'The Fourth Strip' turned each letter into a first-rate short story – sometimes sarcastic, sometimes incredibly funny, sometimes angry, and occasionally even touching. Unprepared readers were

stunned by the very titles of these stories: 'A Blow on the Skull with a Tub'; 'Even a Donkey Moves its Ears'; 'The Station of Merv Spoils Your Nerve'.

The editor of *Gudok* never entered the room without good cause. Only a very quick-witted man could appear with impunity in the nest of irony and escape unscathed by the crossfire.

No one at the time suspected that the room contained the 'mighty cohort' (as they had nicknamed themselves) of young writers who were soon to win considerable fame. The room would occasionally be visited by Babel[9] if he happened to be passing by. He was followed politely by Vasily Reginin.[10] He was editing a new magazine at the time, called *Thirty Days*. Standing on the threshold and looking as if he were afraid to come in, Reginin would start rattling off the latest funny stories. Shklovsky would often burst in like a tornado and with frightening impetuosity sing the praises of Laurence Sterne and Velemir Khlebnikov.[11]

By no means everyone was welcomed in that room. Second-raters were greeted with ominous silence, and boasters and braggarts with icy sarcasm. The room put up with only one second-rate reporter, nicknamed 'Captain Iron Foot'. He did, in fact, have an artificial foot made of iron. He once stepped on the foot of that meek writer, Efim Zozulya,[12] who then had to spend about a month in hospital. As a result, everyone drew their feet under their chairs as soon as the Captain came in. I got into that somewhat terrifying room soon after arriving from Ryazan. I was met calmly, probably because I was friendly with Babel. The staff on 'The Fourth Strip' accepted his word without demur.

'Unheard of things are taking place,' they said. 'The remarkable writer from Peresyp and the bold red cavalry man Isaac Guy de Babel-Maupassant have come from Odessa!'

This sneer concealed a great affection for Babel and even pride in him. He was thought to know the value of every word blindfold.

Whenever Babel came in, he would long and carefully rub his glasses, while wisecracks and witticisms rained down upon him, and then ask with perfect composure:

'Well now, shall we be funny? Or what?'

And an inexhaustible conversation would start, to which the *Gudok* staff gave the name of 'Decameron'. It resembled a magic thread in a fairy tale (perhaps there is no such fairy tale nor any such thread, but no matter). The thread in the story had to be discovered in a great tangled pile of threads, and pulled out. With it would come red, silver, blue and yellow threads and, entangled in them, fir cones, cartridges green with mould, nuts and various seemingly unnecessary, though interesting things.

Such an invisible and non-existent gold thread would seem to lie in the table drawer of any one of the staff – Ilf or Olesha. It would lie there waiting for the appearance of a good talker. Then it was taken out of the drawer and pulled after it an unending string of stories.

A pity that no one at the time had thought of writing them down, if only in a few words. They constituted the sparkling folklore of the time.

I knew some masters of story-telling – Olesha, Dovzhenko,[13] Babel, Bulgakov, Ilf, the Polish writer Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz,[14] Fedin,[15] Frayerman,[88] Kazakevich,[16] Ardov.[17] They were all generous men, wasteful even. They did not mind the fact that the brilliance and wit of their verbal improvisations disappeared leaving practically no trace. They were too rich to regret it.

A few more hours would have needed to be added to the twenty-four for us to be able to write down these unexpected stories. Write them down, of course, over and above what we wrote 'independently'.

The most prolific writer (excluding Balzac) cannot write with a fresh mind and at the top of his form for over four or five hours a day. It is unfair, of course, that a writer is not granted the opportunity of prolonging his life until he has written all he intends

to write. Usually, writers only have time to write a little of what they could have written.

I apologize; I have digressed as usual.

I have already said that after my arrival from Ryazan, I took to paying occasional visits to *Gudok*'s 'The Fourth Strip'. There I would be given some sort of work.

And there I unexpectedly met Evgeny Ivanov, our Odessa friend, ex-editor of *Moryak*.[18] He was still wearing the same naval officer's cap, crumpled *à la* Admiral Nakhimov.[19] He threw his arms round me and told me that he was editing a new Sea-and-River Fleet newspaper in Moscow, called *Na Vakhtye* ('On the Watch') with its editorial office one floor below. Evgeny immediately suggested taking me on as secretary. I agreed, but remarked that I did not like the newspaper's name. Name indeed! 'On the Watch', 'On Zinc', 'On the Snatch'!

Ivanov was not hurt. He interpreted my words as being merely facetious.

Gudok and *Na Vakhtye* had their offices in the Palace of Labour on the quay of the river Moskva, next to Ustinsky Bridge. Before the Revolution the Palace of Labour housed a charity school – an asylum for orphans and abandoned children from all over Russia, founded by the famous educationalist, Betskoy,[20] in the reign of Catherine II. It was a house as vast as the ocean with hundreds of rooms, innumerable passages, turnings and corridors, iron staircases, nooks and crannies, terrifying cellars, grand reception halls, and even a chapel, now turned into a store-room for paper, and its own barber's shop.

It took almost an hour to go round the whole building. The inhabitants of the Palace of Labour used the corridors for taking walks as if they were paths for pedestrians. Dozens of various professional newspapers and periodicals, by now entirely forgotten, were living peacefully in the Palace of Labour.

Nimble young poets made a point of trotting round all the

floors and editorial offices in a single day. Without so much as leaving the Palace they hastily wrote verses and poems glorifying people of all kinds of professions – workers of the needle, workers of the counter, firemen, workers of wood, accountants. They received their author's fees on the spot and spent them on drink in the canteen on the ground floor. The canteen sold beer.

Layers of tobacco smoke drifted permanently under the canteen's ancient vaults. The cigarettes we smoked then were the cheap *Chervonets* brand, as thin as nails. They were not all similarly filled. Some were filled so tightly that one had to inhale with all one's might, till one's head almost swam, in order to get a negligible amount of smoke, others were so loosely filled that as soon as one inhaled, the cigarette folded in two with an unpleasant snapping noise like a penknife. And the all-too-dry tobacco spilled out into the beer or into the plates of cloudy soup. On tables in the canteen stood pots of hydrangeas – large balls of watery-pink flowers on long naked stems. Those flowers resembled scraggy German women with luxuriant but colourless hair. The hydrangea pots were wrapped round in lilac-coloured cigarette paper and had numerous cigarette stubs stuck in them. We liked the canteen. We gathered in it several times a day, drank cold russet-coloured coffee and made a lot of noise.

In the mornings the canteen was empty; it smelled of washed floors and steam. The flower pots no longer had cigarette stubs in them. The old heating system hissed. Outside, snow fell slantwise across the river. One such morning I was sitting in the canteen finishing a short story called 'Labels for Grocery Goods'. Suddenly in came Babel. I quickly covered the sheets with a newspaper, but Babel joined me at my table, sat down, calmly pushed the newspaper away and said:

'Let's have a look! You know I am hideously inquisitive.'

He took the manuscript, put it up to his short-sighted eyes and read the first sentence aloud: 'Don't you think, by the way, that this sunset lights up the distant mountains like a lamp?'

As he was reading it my head went cold out of sheer embarrassment.

'Is this Batum?' asked Babel. 'Oh yes, of course, dear old Batum. Crushed tangerines on the cobble-stones and the hoarse singing of drainpipes . . . Is all this in? Or will it be?'

It was not in the story, but because I was embarrassed I said it would be. The corners of Babel's eyes creased into many little wrinkles, and he gave me a cheerful look.

'Will be?' he asked again. 'A pity; it shouldn't be.'

I did not know what to say.

'Shouldn't be,' he repeated. 'I don't think one should trust another person's eye in these matters. You have a good eye yourself. I trust it and therefore will never borrow so much as a comma from it. What do you want stories with other men's flavour in them for? We are too fond of flavours, particularly Western ones. You have a flavour of Conrad, I – of Maupassant. But we are not Conrads and not Maupassants, after all. Oh, yes and by the way, you have five superfluous words in your first sentence.'

'Which ones?' I asked. 'Let's see.'

Babel took out a pencil and firmly crossed out the words: 'by the way', 'this' (sunset) and 'distant' (mountains). Having done it, he again read out the first sentence, corrected this time to: ' "Don't you think that the sunset lights up the mountains like a lamp?" Is this better?'

'It is.'

'There are all kinds of lamps,' remarked Babel parenthetically. 'But we all miss Batum. Do you remember the narrow bar in the passenger shipping agency? When the steamer from Odessa was late we used to go and sit there and wait for hours. It was empty. Boards of pinewood were stacked up on the quay side. And terebinth boards. The rain splashed down on the water and we drank fantastic black coffee. The winter sea air used to make our cheeks burn. And we had such heavy hearts; because the beautiful women had remained in the north.'

A rickety glass door clanked behind us. Babel looked round and said nervously:

'Hide your story! The "mighty cohort" is advancing upon us.'

I just had time to hide the manuscript. In came Hecht, Ilf, Olesha, Slavin[21] and Reginin. We pushed some tables together and began discussing the fact that the *Ogonyok*[22] editors had decided to publish a collection of stories by young Odessa writers. The writers to be included were Hecht, Slavin, Ilf, Bagritsky,[23] Kolychev,[24] Grebnev[25] and myself, although I was not an Odessan and had spent a mere eighteen months in Odessa. But for some reason everyone considered me an Odessan, probably because of my fondness for Odessa type stories. Babel agreed to write a preface to our collection of tales. I knew everyone sitting round the table from my Odessa days, but here they looked different. The sound of the Black Sea was hundreds of miles away, and the fog of winter had paled the sun-tan. Who knows, if they had not been steeped from early childhood in the sea, the sun, the quaint way of life and southern gaiety, they might not have become writers.

Ilf – calm, laconic, with a somewhat angular, but attractive face – interested me most of all. His thick lips made him look like a Negro. He was as tall and slender as men from Mali, the most graceful tribe in Africa. But what struck me most was the purity of his eyes, their lustre and the intensity of their gaze. The lustre was increased by the small but thick lenses of his rimless pince-nez. The lenses were very bright, as if made of crystal. Ilf was shy, direct, acute in his observations and occasionally sarcastic. He loathed disdainful people and defended from them the timid and the pliant – those whom it was easy to hurt. One day, in my presence, with a lot of people around us, he treated with cold contempt several famous actors who made a point of paying attention only to him, Ilf, and paid no attention at all to the others – simple and insignificant people. They ignored them. This was after the fantastic success of *Twelve Chairs*. Ilf referred to the behaviour of those actors as 'infamous'.

He had an eye like a microscope for vulgar triviality. He noticed and rejected much that other people did not notice or did not want to notice. He did not like the words: 'So what?!' It was a shield which men with an evasive conscience used so they could hide behind it. In his presence you could not lie, behave meanly, engage in facile criticism of people, and you could not be lacking in manners or be rude. At the sight of Ilf, boors immediately dropped their boorishness. The simple nobility of his opinions and of his behaviour required the same of other men. Ilf was an unpredictable man. Sometimes his opinions seemed a little too sharp, but he was almost always right. On one occasion he caused some bewilderment among highly qualified literary specialists by saying that Victor Hugo's way of writing resembled a lavatory out of order. There are lavatories which after a long silence suddenly let the water rush out with a terrible roar. Then there is silence again, and then another rush of water and another roar. That, said Ilf, was precisely what Hugo did, with his thunderous digressions from straightforward narrative. There it goes, at its own quiet pace, the reader reads on, suspecting nothing – and suddenly, bang, without so much as a by-your-leave, down comes an endless digression about compradors, ocean storms or the history of Paris drains. Or anything else. These digressions rush thunderously past the bewildered reader. Then suddenly all is quiet, and the narrative flows smoothly on again.

I used to argue with Ilf about this. I liked Hugo's literary manner. I thought then – and still do – that the narrative must be absolutely free and bold, and that its only law is the author's will. The writer should be able to change the rhythm, character and colour of the narrative as he thinks fit. It was of this and of much else that we spoke in the dark canteen.

The winter came, shaggy and full of sleep. The lamps were lit at two o'clock in the afternoon. The snow outside assumed a blue colour. Street lamps shed a yellow light, and the hydrangeas on

their little tables took on new life and looked a little flushed in the light of electric bulbs. Reginin used to say that both flowers and men had become neurotic these days. It was a well-known fact that neurotics spent their days in a state of torpid depression, to blossom out and become cheerful as evening approached.

One day the door of the canteen was opened and in came Semyon Hecht with a significant and mysterious air. I got to know him in the editorial office of *Na Vakhtye*. He used to bring short sketches about little Black Sea ports. Not about the Odessas, Khersons and Nikolayevs of this world, but about little seaside towns like, say, Akkerman, Ochakov, Aleshki, Golaya Pristan or Skadovsk. There the steamers would tie up at ramshackle old wooden piers – creaky, rickety and covered with fish scales.

The sketches were laconic in style, and as vivid and picturesque as the noisy Black Sea bazaars. They were simply written, but had, as Evgeny Ivanov used to say, 'some incomprehensible secret' about them.

The secret consisted in the considerable effect the sketches had on all the five senses of man. They *smelled* of the sea, of acacias, of melons and of sun-warmed Inkerman stones. You *felt* on your face the breath of sea breezes, and on your hands the weight of tarred rope. In among the hemp fibres glistened tiny crystals of salt. You *tasted* the tang of the greenish goat's cheese and the small cantaloup melons. You *saw* everything in stereoscopic, three-dimensional clarity, even the distant and entirely transparent clouds over the Kinburn Spit. And you *heard* the sharp sing-song accent of the southern dwellers by the Black Sea shores – all the more sing-song during quarrels and altercations.

How this was achieved I do not know. The sketches are now almost forgotten, but this is the impression I have retained of them. It is a pity Hecht did not continue this type of extraordinary guide to small ports.

There are people without whom real literary life cannot be imagined; people who quite independently of whether they have written much or little, are writers by their very essence, by

blood, by their immense interest in the life around them, by their friendliness and sociability, by the vividness of their thought. The life of such people is bound up with writing continually and for ever. Such a man and such a writer was Hecht. This time Hecht's air of mystery made everyone suspicious. But as if by agreement, no one asked him anything. That was a sure way of making him speak. Hecht did not hold out for long. He gave us a wink and took out of his pocket a piece of paper folded in four.

'There!' he said. 'Here's Babel's Preface to our anthology.'

'It's as short as a sparrow's beak!' remarked someone. 'Just a formal little note, no more!'

Hecht was indignant.

'The important thing is how, not how much. Barbarians!'

He unfolded the paper and read out the Preface. We listened and laughed, pleased with the light and enchanting humour of that Preface – obviously the shortest in the world. Later the whole business with the anthology came to nothing; it was never published, and the Preface was lost. Only a short time ago, one of the men Babel wrote about found it among his papers. Here it is:

In Odessa every young man – until he gets married – wants to be a cabin boy on an ocean liner. The steamers that come into our port, set our hearts aflame with longing for new and beautiful lands. Now, here are seven Odessans. They have neither money nor visas. Give them each a passport and three pounds sterling and off they would go to unattainable countries, whose names are as sonorous and as melancholy as the speech of an African who has stepped out on a strange shore.

There they are, seven young Odessans. In the evenings they read novels about life in the colonies, and in the day time they work in the dreariest of provincial statistical offices. And just because they have neither visas nor pounds sterling, Hecht writes of provincial Mozhaisk as of a country discovered by him and unexplored by anyone else, while Slavin tells of Balta in the way Racine does of Carthage. And their tune is taken up in a voice clear and heartfelt by Paustovsky who has somehow found himself in Weinstein's mill in Peresyp and, in a way which is incredibly touching, pretends he is living in the tropics. As a matter of fact, no pretence is necessary. Our Peresyp is, I imagine, better than the tropics.

The third Odessan is Ilf. According to Ilf men are sophisticated actors, geniuses all of them.

Then there is Bagritsky, the most carnivorous of Flemings. He smells like a mackerel just fried by my mother in sunflower oil. He smells like goby fish soup cooked by Malye Fontany fishermen on the aromatic sand by the sea at high noon on an irrepressible July day. Bagritsky is full of a purple liquid, like the water melons which in our youth he and I used to break against kerbstones at the Praktícheskaya harbour near the steamers moored at the nearby Alexander Line.

Kolychev and Grebnev are the youngest of this anthology. They have a lot to tell and we shall not escape them. They will have it their own way and will tell us of amazing things.

The fact of the matter is that in Odessa every young man – until he gets married – wants to be a cabin boy on an ocean liner. The only trouble is that in Odessa we get married with extraordinary persistence.

4
Night Trains

We all lived anyhow at the time, and therefore rather badly. Olesha and Ilf were given a room as narrow as a pencil-case, at the *Gudok* printing office. Hecht lived somewhere among shoemakers in Maryswood. Bulgakov was quartered in Sadovo-Triumfalnaya Street in a dark communal flat, vast as a skating rink. Bulgakov's neighbours brought a cockerel from the country. It confused Bulgakov by crowing at night irrespective of time. Life in town had proved a little baffling for it.

I had to leave Granat Lane, as the lodger whose room I was occupying had come back from his assignment. The *Na Vakhtye* correspondent, Captain Zuzenko, found a shelter for me in Pushkino, near Moscow, next to the house he was living in. The shelter turned out to be an icy cottage, empty as a barn. My room contained nondescript dusty furniture and a shabby polar bear skin stretched out on a broken-down sofa. The dust on the furniture seemed to have turned to stone; it could not be rubbed off with anything short of a file. Mice squeaked in the grooves between the logs of which the walls were made.

I have written quite a lot about Zuzenko elsewhere. Indeed, one could not help writing about that stubborn and kind man with a face maimed by boxing. We became good friends clearly because of our contrasting characters. Zuzenko never had any doubts, I overflowed with them. Zuzenko was somewhat rude and sarcastic, I, to my own great regret, was polite even to tramway pickpockets, and disliked sarcastic remarks.

At first I enjoyed living out of town. At that time a virgin forest still stretched from Mytishchi to Pushkino. I had to take a train every day to go to the editorial office in Moscow, coming back at midnight by the last train. Just before it left Moscow station the conductor would go through the carriages and corral all the passengers into one carriage – for their own security. There was a great deal of looting in suburban trains ('undressing' it was called at the time).

The passengers showed signs of nervousness and were mostly silent. Indeed, conversation was difficult. The small carriages made such a rattle as they rolled along that all one could do was shout. The passengers were for the most part the same and knew each other by sight. All newcomers were therefore regarded with suspicion, and one sat at a distance from them. The most dangerous stage of the journey was considered to be the run from the Losinostrovskaya station to the platform of Tayninka. Experienced passengers referred to Tayninka as 'a den of bandits'. Fellow passengers getting out at Tayninka, quite deserted at midnight, were looked upon with pity and bets were laid as to their chances of getting home. After Tayninka passengers no longer felt nervous and dozed right up to Pushkino.

Zuzenko and I always travelled together. There were two advantages in that for me: one on the journey from Moscow to Pushkino, and the other from Pushkino to Moscow. The advantage on the journey from Moscow to Pushkino consisted in the fact that with Zuzenko by my side I felt safe. A fearless man of immense physical strength, he was able, with the help of some sixth sense, to recognize any underworld gang and immediately took the offensive. As soon as he saw a man in the carriage 'suspiciously like the member of a gang' he would give him a long, glowering look, rise to his feet, go up to him slowly and threateningly and say:

'Hop it, at the very next station; out of the train! And no yelping!'

At the same time Zuzenko would stick his hand in the pocket

of his great-coat. The strangest thing of all was that Zuzenko never made a mistake: characters 'suspiciously like members of a gang' would get off the train without so much as a swear word.

On one occasion, however, Zuzenko found himself at a loss. That happened after we had passed Tayninka. All were quietly dozing. A young lad, aged about fourteen, was sleeping with his feet tucked under him, on the bench facing us. He was very restless and sometimes even jumped in his sleep. Zuzenko suggested that the boy was suffering from worms. The train gave a sudden jerk at a point, the boy was thrown upwards, he woke up and, quite unexpectedly, started to shoot, screaming as he did so: 'Save me, save me!' He was shooting like an experienced gangster, out of the pocket of his coat. The passengers woke up and rushed out of the compartment. Zuzenko seized the boy by the collar, but let him go at once.

'What's this?' he cried. 'The little so-and-so! How can he shoot? His hands are not in his pockets!'

At that moment, one last deafening shot rang out of the boy's pocket. The boy howled. His pocket was smouldering. A suffocating smoke was billowing out of it.

'Take my coat off, mister!' cried the boy desperately, 'or I'll burn to death!'

Zuzenko pulled off the boy's coat.

'What's this you've got in your pocket, you little rascal?'

The pock-marked, tear-stained rascal confessed that he had caps for his toy pistol piled up in his pocket. The caps had apparently become heated, jumped about and rubbed against each other when the train swayed and jerked and then, at a particularly violent jerk of the train, they suddenly exploded all together.

The smouldering fire in the coat pocket was put out. The passengers, of course, swore at the boy, while Zuzenko roared with laughter swaying backwards and forwards like a praying Arab. Then, he said, unexpectedly:

'Just a subject for Jacobs.'

W. W. Jacobs was a British humorous writer, fond of this kind of ridiculous story.

The other advantage of knowing Zuzenko was connected with the morning train journeys to Moscow. In the course of these journeys I heard many thrilling stories of his life.

No sooner did Zuzenko get into the train at Pushkino than he would start telling me these stories. Inquisitive passengers tried to sit as near us as possible.

The rumour of these stories soon spread throughout Pushkino and the carriage where Zuzenko happened to be would get so packed with people that there was no room to sit. In order to hear better passengers would crowd round the skipper and press down on my back. I took a long time to find my breath again after that.

The conductor would come and start a speech about the wrong load distribution in the train. All the carriages were empty, he said, and yet it was not possible to squeeze into that one. Besides, it wasn't built for such a mass of passengers. All against regulations, it was! The axle-box was sure to catch fire.

On each such occasion Zuzenko and the other passengers would embark upon a confused technical argument with the conductor and try to convince him that the carriage 'would not sag and the axle-box would not catch fire'.

Zuzenko brought to the *Na Vakhtye* office the reminiscences of his voyages. He used an old typewriter with Latin characters to type these reminiscences. Wherever the Latin letters did not coincide with the Russian ones Zuzenko filled the Russian letters in by hand. It was terrible drudgery.

I liked the mocking look with which Zuzenko weighed up the person he was talking with, his heavy and careful step as if pacing the deck in a storm, his rough-edged humour and his fondness for tricky and naïve ventures for the sake of doubtful earnings. There were many unemployed sea captains in Russia at the time for the simple reason that there were no ships. Zuzenko was therefore put on the reserve of the Soviet merchant navy. He was

waiting for what he referred to as a suitable 'tub' in which he would go to sea if not as skipper then at least as third mate. As officer in the reserve Zuzenko received quite insignificant pay and, hence, was always on the lookout for a chance to make money on the side.

It was the time of NEP – the New Economic Policy. All NEP men and so-called private traders Zuzenko loathed with a bitter and unflinching loathing. They made up the tribe of profiteers and tricksters. Those of them who ranked slightly higher than the rest and were a little richer tried to pass off as industrialists, large-scale merchants and businessmen. But these purely external appearances had, as a rule, nothing to substantiate them and everyone knew the whole thing was bogus.

Generally speaking, our attitude to NEP was sceptical. We all knew that NEP was no more than a temporary phenomenon, that from the very hour of its birth it already had one foot in the grave and that once it had accomplished what it had to accomplish it would be thrown away on the rubbish heap of history. This, in fact, is precisely what happened.

The NEP men themselves got on everyone's nerves. They hurried in a mad scramble for self-enrichment. They were breathless from the hurry and half-crazed with inevitable fear and with the effort to think up all kinds of tricks and schemes. The limits of the permissible were not very clear. All this rendered NEP men somewhat hysterical. Their existence in shabby and spasmodic grandeur, with ramshackle motor-cars, faded beauties and restaurant-gypsy music, reminded one of a poor play.

Somewhere in Siberia and the Far East, mines and gold-fields were let out to concessionaries, but this was such a long way from Moscow that it seemed unreal and caused no alarm. So far as we were concerned, we only met the NEP small fry. We were not put out, naturally enough, by the sour-faced ladies and little old women selling doughnuts and home-made toffee from the windows of their ground-floor rooms. They laid out

their tempting wares on window-sills. Apart from cakes and pastries you could also see little mounds of cut sugar on chipped china plates (real 'Saxon' ware), knitted ties, cigarette lighters, whale bones for ladies' corsets and smart-looking – pink and blue – elastic for ladies' garters, no longer fit for wear as the elastic had long since perished. We reacted to NEP as to something rather comic in every-day life.

Jacob Ratzer, 'King of charcoal', was particularly famous in Moscow at the time. His enterprise was housed in Maryswood, opposite the building where Hecht had his room. Every morning, in early dawn, Jacob Ratzer would step out on to the balcony of his house and look down on the long procession of charcoal men driving their lame steeds. Ratzer stood like a general reviewing his troops. After the review the charcoal men would disperse in all the nooks and lanes of Moscow, and courtyards would resound with their gloomy cries: 'Here's charcoal! Who needs it?' Covered with charcoal dust, they looked like Negroes. The inhabitants of Moscow wondered at the whites of their eyes shining like enamel under their blue eyelids.

From time to time Jacob Ratzer would publish an announcement in *Izvestia*: 'There have been occasions when Jacob Ratzer has failed to deliver the full weight of charcoal, but on no occasion has Jacob Ratzer's charcoal turned out to be damp.' On little bags of samovar charcoal Jacob Ratzer would print quite different and rather recherché verses by way of advertisement.

Also widely known was another private trader answering to the name of Funk. He started the production of shoe polish in Moscow. Funk knew a thing or two about advertising. All the streets had jolly little men, cut out of tin, dangling from lamp posts. They danced a jig, with elegant yellow straw hats raised over their heads, flashing teeth and shiny shoes just polished with Funk's cream. The little men appealed rapturously to people to clean their shoes with nothing but Funk's cream polish. This appeal sounded absurd at the time. The streets were full of *besprizorniki*[26] standing around on their horny bare feet, and in

any case there was no footwear in Moscow which needed such perfect polish.

Moscow was full of *besprizorniki*. They were caught and taken to colonies, but they immediately reappeared in the streets and market places, walking about in droves, playing cards in dark alleys, begging for cigarettes and singing rowdy songs in trams, to the accompaniment of wooden spoons with which they beat out the rhythm.

It was in the suburban train at night that I met the *besprizorniki* face to face. It happened in late autumn just before the bitter frosts of 1924. Zuzenko and I went into a dimly lit carriage. Only the platform lamps shone brightly. Their light penetrated into the carriage through the rain-stained windows. The rain was pouring down, cold, persistent, dank. A pile of grey rags was stirring in one corner of the carriage.

'Bats,' said Zuzenko.

It was the *besprizorniki*. They were lying in a heap on the floor, pressed against each other, covering with their bodies the smallest of the boys, aged about eight. The lamp shone straight on him and the first thing I noticed was his huge eyes with no tears in them, and then the trembling, the terrible, uncontrollable trembling of his wizened little body. He trembled so much that the window pane, loose in its frame, tinkled in response. The boys lying on either side of him were trying to cover him with the flaps of their tattered jackets.

These jackets obtained from some grown-up man or woman were long, reaching below the knee, with dangling sleeves. Time, dust and dirt had given them a uniformly mouse-grey colour and made them shine as if covered with oil. In the torn and battered pockets of these jackets the *besprizorniki* kept all their belongings – bits of broken combs, knives, cigarettes, crusts of bread, matches, greasy cards, and bits of dirty bandages. They did not even have shirts, however old or decayed, under their jackets – just their frozen, dirty, greenish-yellow bodies, covered with bleeding streaks which they got from scratching.

'Don't shiver, Tsarevich,' said the slightly older boy in a raucous voice. 'We'll get warm in Mytishchi.'

The conductor came in, shone his torch on the *besprizorniki*, swore and went on. We sat down at a distance. There were practically no other passengers in the carriage apart from us. And the few that had come in were sitting quietly, pretending not to notice anything.

'Now then, lads!' said Zuzenko suddenly. 'Anyone wishing to smoke, come right here.'

Only one boy – the slightly older one – got up and came up. The others – there were three of them – remained lying on the floor. The boy sat down on the bench opposite us, drew up his bare feet, greedily breathed in the smoke of his cigarette, spat heftily on the floor and said, glancing at the naval crest (nicknamed 'crab') on Zuzenko's cap.

'You're good-looking, sailor . . .'

'Shut up, lad!' said Zuzenko, cutting him short.

The boy looked the other way and suddenly burst out singing at the top of his raucous, childish voice:

Forgotten, neglected
In my youthful state
I was born an orphan
And misery's my fate.

'You drop that!' repeated Zuzenko. 'It's no time for jokes. Your little friend is near enough dying.'

'This is Shura Tsarevich,' explained the *besprizornik*. 'And my name is Letchik.'

'I've a proposal to make,' said Zuzenko, still in the same calm voice. 'He can't be left like this.'

'Mm!' replied Letchik with complete indifference and blew his nose into a sleeve as black as a stove-pipe. 'He's been burning like this for two days now, all glowing, he is.'

'Well, now! You come over to see us in Pushkino. We have a house. We'll heat it well, you'll live there for a few days and then

we'll see. You'll do what you like after that. You can't let a little lad like this die.'

'And you won't have us arrested?'

'Blockhead!' said Zuzenko, feeling seriously hurt. 'I am a sea captain. Understand? And he is a writer over there.'

'Will you give us grub?' asked Letchik. 'All four of us?'

'You must really be a fool!'

'Just a moment!' replied Letchik and went off to join his gang for a moment. They carried on a long whispered conversation, then Letchik came back and said nonchalantly:

'The chaps say it's OK.'

My cottage had five empty rooms. The largest was next to mine. There was one stove to heat them all. No need to ask anyone about anything – the owner of the cottage lived in Moscow and I had only seen him once. When we brought the *besprizorniki* back with us to the cottage the stove was still warm. The store-room had old straw mattresses in striped covers lying in it. We spread them out on the floor next to the stove. The *besprizorniki* sat on the mattresses, smoked and never said a word. I brought Shura Tsarevich a pillow and a bearskin. The boys looked at me in silence. I made Shura lie down and covered him with the bear skin. Then Letchik said:

'The bear will be covered with lice.'

I made no reply. The boys were also silent, as if depressed about something. Zuzenko brought a superior Australian Primus stove from his cottage and boiled some water for the tea in a large, chipped kettle. He whispered to me that he was off to get a doctor and disappeared once again. The boys showed signs of worry, but I told them the skipper had gone to fetch the grub. Shura emitted a thin little whistle as he breathed. I felt his forehead – it was aflame with raging fever.

An hour later Zuzenko was back bringing the doctor with him – a little old Armenian. With fingers numb with cold he was doing his unsuccessful best to clean the glasses of his old-fashioned horn-rimmed pince-nez and kept repeating despairingly:

'Oh, what a disaster! What a disaster!'

By the time he arrived the *besprizorniki* had had their tea and had fallen asleep, all of them in a huddle on one straw mattress. Not one of them woke up. The doctor examined Shura, frowned and said that the boy had double pneumonia and must immediately be sent to hospital. Zuzenko had a large toboggan in his house. The skipper used it to carry wood and water. While he was fetching the toboggan I poured the doctor some tea. He clutched the glass in both hands to warm his fingers and for a long time never said a word. His pince-nez danced about on the bridge of his nose, slipped off occasionally and several times almost fell on the floor. The doctor took it off, brought it up close to his old, slightly bulging eyes and asked:

'How did it happen?'

'What? You mean the boy?'

'No! How did it happen that thousands of children have been thrown out into the street like so many kittens?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh yes you do!' he said firmly. 'So do I. But we don't want to think about it.'

I did not reply. What could one say! It was hopeless. What was the use milling over and over the same senseless arguments!

'What a disaster!' repeated the doctor with a smile that was half a sneer. 'They need looking after. Just looking after. But it's now too late for these boys to go to the south. The authorities must be informed and they must be made to join a children's colony. They will perish otherwise.'

Zuzenko brought his toboggan. We wrapped Shura up in anything we could find, including the bear skin, laid him on the toboggan and took him with all due care to the hospital. I wanted to wake Letchik, but he was as fast asleep as the two other boys, and did not wake up, though he kept turning over and over again in his sleep and scratched his chest with a kind of frenzy. We left, but did not lock the house so as not to frighten the boys when they woke up. When we came back it was dawn.

The rain had stopped. The wood in the distance breathed out cold and damp. The house was empty. The gang had vanished. On the cover of *The Hungry Year* by Boris Pilnyak, someone had written in large, crooked characters: 'Shura Balashov, father dead, mother lost.'

'Well!' said Zuzenko with a sigh. 'The birds have flown away from their well-wishers. I have always considered that freedom is stronger than the fear of death. The boys think so too.'

Shura Balashov (Tsarevich) died four days later. For a long time afterwards I could not get rid of a guilty feeling of responsibility. Zuzenko kept saying that there was no question of guilt, and that I was a despicable intellectual suffering from neurasthenia, but the muscles of the skipper's face were taut and he smoked incessantly.

The boy was buried in a shallow grave on the edge of the cemetery. The rain fell remorselessly, beating down dead leaves and piling them on the low hump made by the grave. I would be quite unable to find it now, of course, but I know roughly where the helpless little creature, absolutely alone in its suffering, lies buried.

Life in Pushkino was not cosy. I spent every day till late at night in the editorial office of *Na Vakhtye*. It was midnight by the time I reached the station and took the train to Pushkino, where I was immediately enveloped by its deserted atmosphere, by silence and by darkness. I fell asleep immediately I got into bed and in the morning, while it was still dark, I had to get up, light the stove and hurry off to the train that took me to Moscow. The constant repetition of the same actions bored and tired me; I frequently went hungry and it was this perhaps that caused occasional fainting fits – always at night.

Once I fell on the stone floor of the Northern Station and came to in the Station Reception Centre with my head bleeding as a result of the knock I had given it. What shocked me most was the fact that the sleepy nurse who was bringing me back to life suspected that I was drunk. I took offence and tottered off out of

the Reception Centre. I failed to catch the last train or to meet Zuzenko and sat up all night in an empty carriage on the sidings near the station. My head was aching and I felt dizzy, I was sorry there were no *besprizorniki* next to me. Somehow they made life more bearable; in my weak state I felt as much of a stray as they were.

5
Cold

A black, tar-laden smoke, slightly coloured by the purple flame rose up in billows over the bonfires. The bonfire smoke and the January cold hung like a low pall over Moscow. Trams, bells ringing, ground their slow way through the smoke. The carriages with their mantles of hoar-frost at the entrance, looked like caves of ice. Bonfires in the squares were built of logs and old telegraph poles. Policemen in grey astrakhan caps topped with red – for which they received at the time the nickname of 'bullfinches' – warmed themselves by the fires. They held their horses by the bridle, and the horses were covered with rime, and chafing with impatience. Loud sounds of explosion came from the direction of Red Square. The stone-hard earth was being broken up to make a grave for Lenin.

Moscow was clothed by the bonfires and the smoke in mourning weeds of black and red. The men, keeping watch on the infinitely slow crowd moving towards the Hall of Pillars where Lenin was lying, wore black and red armbands on their sleeves. Queues started very far out in various parts of Moscow. I joined one such queue at Kursk Station at two o'clock in the morning. By the time we reached Lubianka Square we could hear the distant strains of the funeral march coming from the direction of the Hall of Pillars. The strains became louder with every step, conversation in the crowd gradually ceased, little clouds issuing from people's lips as they breathed, came in shorter and shorter, ever more spasmodic gasps.

'Oh brothers, farewell . . .' Someone started softly to sing these words, and then abruptly stopped. All sound appeared superfluous in this polar night. Only the rustle and the crunching of many thousands of feet on the snow was natural, continuous, majestic. In pitch darkness men and women streamed towards the bier from the outskirts of Moscow, from its suburbs, from fields, from factories where all work had stopped. They came from everywhere.

Silence reigned supreme over the city. Even locomotives on distant railway lines no longer hooted as was their wont. The country was advancing towards the raised bier in which, among the flowers and crimson flags, the haggard face of a man with a broad, pale forehead and with eyes as if half-closed, was not immediately discernible.

Everyone went. Because there was not a single individual in the land whose life had not been affected by Lenin's existence, not one who had not personally experienced the effect of his will. He had moved life. That move was like a geological shift which had shaken Russia to her foundations. The breath produced by thousands of men rose and spread like steam through the ice-cold Hall of Pillars.

From time to time the smooth strains of orchestral music were shattered by the shrill wailing of trumpet calls. But these were quickly silenced and the orchestra's measured tones came through again, lending solemnity to grief without softening it.

Zuzenko walked next to me in the crowd. For a long time we walked in silence. Then Zuzenko shivered and said crossly:

'How damn cold! As cold as in a polar cod canteen!' (This was how he referred contemptuously to all polar countries.) 'Enough to make eyelids freeze together. Fantastic frost!'

He was silent for a little and then said again: 'Everything is fantastic just now. Take Lenin, now . . . A fantastic destroyer of all kinds of evil and a fantastic creator . . . Breathe through your scarf or your bronchial tubes will freeze . . . A pity I've never had

a chance to have a talk with him. About a world union of seamen. A fantastic talk we would have had!'

Slowly we walked past the bier and even more slowly walked out of the Hall of Pillars. Every one in the crowd looked back and slowed down his pace, trying in that last glimpse to retain in his memory all he had just seen – Lenin's face, his bulging forehead, tightly pressed lips and small hands. He was dead, the man who had refashioned the world at one stroke. Every one of us was thinking of what would now happen to us. 'Our children,' said Zuzenko when we came out of the Hall of Pillars, 'will envy us, unless they grow up to be utter cretins. We have penetrated into the very centre of history. Do you understand?'

I understood it perfectly, as did everyone else who lived in those alarming and tempestuous times. No generation had ever experienced what we had experienced. Neither the elation, nor the hopes, nor the disappointments, nor the victories. The victors, green with hunger and black from the smoke of battles, were led by no more than an inflexible faith in the triumph of the coming day.

I was thirty years old at the time, but I had the impression of having behind me a life so enormously long that the thought of it filled me with terror. It even sent a shiver down my spine.

'Are you really a child of your time?' I asked myself. I understood with the whole of my being that I could not be separated from my time, from the fate of my country, from the joys experienced by my people and from the sufferings which fate had showered on it with so generous a hand.

Zuzenko and I were going to the Northern Station through streets gripped by the cold. The cold howled fiercely about our feet.

' "Our age strides forth along its iron path," ' I was quoting to myself. These words pursued me throughout the whole of that day.

'What are you muttering about?' asked Zuzenko.

'Oh . . . nothing really . . .'

An iron age! And all of a sudden, far away words rose up from the deepest recesses of my memory and echoed in it:

Who had made Theocritus' roses grow in the deepest of snows?
Who, oh who, in an iron age had guessed that the Golden was coming?

'Our age strides forth along its iron path.' But its path leads, of course, to the Age of Gold, to peace, to reason. To the Age of Gold! Man must believe this. Otherwise he cannot live.

Later, Zuzenko and I took a train to Pushkino. The empty suburban train thundered and swayed in its mantle of steam. The carriage wheels pounded their rhythmic beat. The sound of it echoed through the night. It seemed to me as if the echo, too, had frozen solid and that was why it gave out a ringing sound like thin ice broken by a stone. The frost in Pushkino was such that the air seemed to steam.

'Forty degrees below zero, if not more,' said Zuzenko. 'Come round to my place. We'll warm ourselves up.'

I liked going round to Zuzenko's. His small cottage stood buried in the snow right up to the windows.

Zuzenko lit a candle. The log walls were decorated with foreign shipping advertisements fixed to them with drawing pins. The advertisements were very old and torn, but tempting. Especially one, which pictured a striped, red and white, lighthouse on a sandy shore, an oily sea and a flowering oleander bush. It was hard to believe that there could exist in the world such a daring combination of crimson flowers and lilac sea. It was always cold in Zuzenko's cottage. The windows were covered with ice – the snow that winter fell almost continuously. The advertisements seemed to shrink and their colours fade as a result of the frost. I liked looking at them and was well aware that I would never get to any of the magnificent places pictured on them.

Apart from the advertisements, Zuzenko also had a Bible, sailing directions for the Atlantic, several books on Marxism and a bedraggled letter 'N' volume of the *Brockhaus Encyclopædia.*

Zuzenko, I discovered, had studied the Bible in order to have stormy disputations with Christian priests in Australia where he had lived for several years. This was his favourite occupation, apart from his job as a sailor and his constant battles with various yes-men, bureaucrats, NEP men, milk-sops and wishy-washy intellectuals.

Zuzenko lit his Australian Primus stove. It bellowed like an overheated steam boiler and was ready to burst any minute. The temperature of the room rose. In complete silence we ate black rye biscuits washing them down with tea. When we had finished Zuzenko asked:

'Are you going to Lenin's funeral tomorrow?'

'Of course.'

'What in? The frost is getting harder. Your miserable little autumn coat is made of paper, not to say muck. In fact you're shaking all over, even now. Pity there's no thermometer here.'

'I've got one.'

'You take your temperature. And tomorrow morning I'll come to see you; quite early.'

I went. A narrow footpath through the snow led from Zuzenko's house to mine. Dense fir trees swept the footpath with their shaggy snow-laden paws. I brushed against them as I passed and several times the snow fell down my neck. And every time I shuddered as if I had been stabbed. Frequently, I made a false step and sank into the deep snow. The forest around me crackled and creaked. My room was cold too – like an ice-box. I lit the stove, frequently interrupting my work by sitting down on a stool to get rid of a feeling of giddiness, and then lay down on my bed without bothering to undress, and covered myself with my bear skin. The small boy, Shura Balashov, had died under it and the hospital had sent it back to me. The curtains had frozen to the window panes and mice squeaked somewhere between the logs of which the walls were built.

Even underneath the bear skin I could smell the nauseous stench of mouse droppings. And all the time, constantly losing

the thread of my thoughts, which snapped like rotten yarn, I thought of my failure to arrange my life properly and of the fact that not only my room, but the whole of life must be spring-cleaned and washed, and fresh air introduced into it. But for some reason it was quite impossible to do so in the winter. As if the disarray of my existence had stuck to me and I could not tear it away for want of strength. I realized that I was falling ill and said aloud, so that my voice rang through the room and through all the empty frozen cottage:

'Man can't be alone. If he is alone he has only himself to blame. Only himself.'

My head swam. It occurred to me now that, in days like those one simply must not give way to vague, sad thoughts, one must not become a slave to grief and melancholy.

The world was shaken to its foundations. Moscow was aflame with funerary fires. Men were waiting to be saved from thousands of years of helpless sufferings. The man who knew what had to be done was gone. He knew. Tomorrow he would be lowered into the ice-cold earth. The very first night would bury the grave under the snow and would continue on its predetermined way with total indifference.

I stretched out for my watch. The fire in the stove had burned itself out, but by the light of the glowing embers I saw that it was already six o'clock. The mice scurried and squeaked more than ever inside the walls. I felt hot and stuffy even though the cold held my forehead in its icy grip. This was giving me a headache.

I came to in the morning, if a grey twilight, a ghostly shadow which crept into the room and immediately fell into darkness on the floor, could be called morning. The snow had stopped. I had to get up and go to Moscow. While I was washing with some thawed water, the twilight was gradually turning blue. Soon, orange spots of sunlight fell on the black walls and on the photograph of Blok.[27] Zuzenko knocked at my window and shouted through cupped hands held at the window-pane that the frost had reached fantastic proportions and that his lungs ached.

'There can be no question of your going to Moscow,' he shouted. 'Stay here! Don't you dare get up and open the door for me. I'll come back soon and tell you everything.'

I had neither strength nor voice to argue. He went. I put on my coat all the same, twisted an old scarf round my neck, pulled a cap down on my ears and went out.

I staggered into the railway station just as the last morning train left for Moscow. I was too late. Then I set out to walk to Moscow along the railway line. But I had barely walked two kilometres when I felt giddy. I wanted to sit down on the bank, right there in the snow, and rest a little. But I knew that in such a frost that must not be done. And so I kept going, stumbling as I walked, though I realized that it was senseless to go on and that I should turn back.

Absurdly, I kept saying to myself: 'I shall just go as far as that telegraph pole and turn back.'

The telegraph pole did not keep me for long. I rested against it, looked back and saw Pushkino sending out its billows of smoke, the smoke of its burning birch logs, out of every one of its chimney stacks. The smoke was purple in the frosty sun.

In front of me the river Klyazma sent up clouds of steam just as fiercely as Pushkino billowed forth its smoke, and covered the whole landscape. The forest crackled under the frost, like smouldering logs, and the snow flakes like so many flat sequins or, even, fish scales, fell occasionally from the tops of trees. Every snow-laden tree stood guard over this quiet wintry desert.

I stood and waited. I tried to convince myself that in that fragile silence I was certain to hear the combined howl of all the factory sirens of Moscow when the coffin was being lowered into the grave. Perhaps I would even hear the thunderous sigh of cannon salvoes. But all was very quiet. Only the crackling of the forest became stronger and stronger.

A train, throwing out columns of smoke, was approaching from the direction of Pushkino. I could hear the swelling roar of its thunderous progress. It was the Siberian Express. It always

passed Pushkino at that hour, without stopping or slowing down, dragging behind it over the points its heavy Pullman cars. One always had the impression that the cars wanted to tarry, to stop even, but the engine drove them relentlessly on and did not give them time to regain their breath.

The train was approaching. Suddenly it shuddered. The brakes clanked and screeched. The roar of the wheels ceased all at once and the train stopped in the middle of the forest. The engine was breathing like a broken-winded horse. It stopped because the hour of the funeral had struck.

All at once, steam rushed out in a jet from the engine's belly and the engine screeched. It screeched continuously without changing its note. It was a screech of despair, of anger, of appeal. The mighty whistle spread far and wide – out into the cold, over the forests and over the fields where the snows lay in one thick blanket.

A minute passed, then two. The engine went on screeching just as plaintively, just as mournfully and continuously, making it known to the world that in Moscow Lenin's body was being buried at that very moment. The train had rushed through thousands of miles of the great Russian land, but was late – by only forty minutes.

It seemed to me that I was hearing not just the whistle of the Siberian express, but the wailing of all Moscow. That minute life had stopped. Even ocean going vessels lay to and let their sirens weep over the leaden wintry waters. The whistle suddenly ceased and the train started again, slowly, on, on into the mist, towards nearby Moscow.

It was all over. I staggered home. Flags at half-mast drooped mournfully over the cottages. On my way back I did not meet a single person. It seemed to me that the whole world had died and that life had ended like the last bleak light of that January day, with its quite unnecessary cold and its acrid smell of smoke.

Zuzenko came back in the evening and found me with a high temperature. I was ill for over a month.

6
Snow Caps

One quiet, snowy day towards the spring Bulgakov came to visit me in Pushkino. He was at the time writing his novel *The White Guard* and for one of the chapters he felt it was essential to have a close look at some 'snow caps' – those tiny mounds of snow that are built up in the course of a long winter on roofs, fences and thick branches of trees. All day long Bulgakov, tall, lean, sad, with attentive grey eyes, wandered about Pushkino – deserted as it was that year – and observed, wrapped in an old, balding fur coat.

'Good!' he would say. 'It's exactly what I need. These caps look as if they've gathered in the whole silence of winter.'

'Decadent writer!' said Zuzenko of Bulgakov. 'But, obviously, a damn gifted fellow. Very conscientious in the way he is training himself.'

What did he mean by this? I failed to understand. Then Zuzenko explained, unwillingly and with the same lack of clarity.

'He is practising to acquire impressions. Clever chap!'

In this he was probably right. Bulgakov was vastly interested in anything out of the average in the world around him. All that rose above its surface, be it a man or some quality of his, or some extraordinary action or an unusual thought or a detail he had suddenly noticed (like the footlights' little tongues of candle flame, bent at right angles by the draught) – any of these things he would immediately and effortlessly assimilate and use in his novels and in his plays and in ordinary conversation. Perhaps this was the reason why Bulgakov had no equal in thinking up

biting nicknames which would then stick. He was particularly adept at it in the Kiev school which we both attended.

'You have a venomous eye and an acid tongue,' the assistant headmaster Bodyansky would say to Bulgakov. 'You're just as keen as can be to have a row, and yet you've been brought up in a respectable professional family. Just think of it! A pupil who calls his own headmaster a "milk churn"! The indecency of it! And the shame!' but Bodyansky's eyes smiled as he said it.

The Bulgakov family was well known in Kiev – a vast family, with many branches, intellectual through and through. There was something Chekhovian about that family, out of *The Three Sisters*, and something theatrical. The Bulgakovs lived in a very picturesque Kiev lane, on the way down to the Podol, opposite St Andrew's Church. Sounds of the piano and even the piercing notes of a French horn, voices of young people, running and laughter, arguments and singing could be constantly heard in their flat.

Families like these, with deep-seated traditions of professional and cultural interests were the ornament of provincial life, like nests of progressive thought. I wonder why no one has yet attempted (perhaps because it is too difficult) to study the life of such families and explain their significance for some particular town – Saratov, Kiev or Vologda. It would make a valuable and, indeed, a fascinating book on the history of Russian cultural development.

After I had finished school I lost sight of Bulgakov, and it was only now, in the editorial office of *Gudok*, that we met again. That winter Bulgakov was writing his sharp little tales in which mockery and phantasmagoria had all the power of offensive weapons. I remember the bewilderment caused by such articles and tales of Bulgakov's as 'Notes on Shirt-Cuffs', 'The Fatal Eggs', 'The Demoniad' and 'The Adventures of Chicikov' (a poem in two parts with a prologue and an epilogue).

The Moscow Arts Theatre made a suggestion to Bulgakov that he should write a play based on his novel *The White Guard*.

Bulgakov agreed. This was the origin of *The Days of the Turbins*. This long-suffering and brilliant play went through a lot of difficulties, misadventures and censorship restrictions, but came out victorious in the end owing to its great qualities and its dramatic force. In the course of its production for the stage a great many grotesque, almost incredible things happened. Hoffmannesque situations pursued Bulgakov all his life.

It was no accident that Bulgakov's favourite author was Gogol. Not Gogol as formally interpreted and remembered by us from our school days, but the frantic romancer, who frightened people beyond measure by his rapturousness, by his sardonic laughter, and by his extravagant imagination which makes the blood run cold. Gogol always seems to be standing behind his readers and characters, scrutinizing them. And people look round because they are afraid of his penetrating gaze, but having looked round they suddenly notice with relief that Gogol's eyes are filled with tears of admiration for something as beautiful as the sparkling Italian sky over Rome or the frantic gallop of a Russian troïka over the grassy steppes.

Bulgakov's destiny was strange and hard. The Moscow Arts Theatre produced only his old plays. His new play, *Molière*, was forbidden after seven performances. His novels were no longer published.

This caused him a lot of suffering, a lot of pain, and finally he could bear it no longer and wrote a letter to Stalin, in which the dignity of a Russian writer was given full expression. In that letter he insisted on a writer's sacred and only right – the right to be published and thus to communicate with his people and serve it with all the powers of his being. He received no answer. Bulgakov was in the depths of despondency. He could not put a brake on his literary ideas, could not let his imagination run to waste. There is not, and there cannot be, a worse torture for a man of letters.

Deprived of opportunities for publishing his work, he invented amazing stories – sad and funny – for the consumption of his

most intimate friends. He used to tell these stories at home over a cup of tea. Unfortunately, I have retained only a small part of them in my memory. I have forgotten most of the stories; they have been carried away, as used to be said in the old days, by the river Lethe. As a child I had a very clear picture of Lethe – a slow, subterranean river with black waters in which all objects, men and even human voices sank like a light, extinguished very gradually, but irrevocably.

I remember one story of Bulgakov's: Bulgakov is supposed to be writing long and enigmatic letters to Stalin every day, signing them 'Tarzan'. Stalin is surprised and even somewhat frightened every time he gets them. Like all men, he is curious and demands that Beria should immediately bring the author of the letters for him to see. Stalin flies into a temper: 'You keep a lot of loafers in your department, and can't even catch one man!'

At last Bulgakov is caught and brought into the Kremlin. Stalin looks at him searchingly, even with a certain degree of cordiality, smokes his pipe and asks him, in a leisurely way:

'Is it you who write these letters to me?'

'It is, Joseph Vissarionovich.'

Silence.

'Why do you ask, Joseph Vissarionovich?' asks Bulgakov, feeling worried.

'Oh, for no particular reason. Interesting, what you write.'

Silence.

'So it's you – Bulgakov?'

'It is, Joseph Vissarionovich.'

'Why these patched trousers, broken shoes? A shame! A great shame!'

'Oh it's just that . . . my earnings are a bit on the low side, Joseph Vissarionovich.'

Stalin turns to the Commissar for Supplies.

'What are you sitting here for, doing nothing? Can't you clothe a man? Your people can steal all right, but when it comes

to clothing a writer, they're not up to it! Why so pale? Frightened? Clothe him at once. In gabardine! And what are you sitting here for, twirling your moustache? Just look at your boots! Take them off at once and give them to this man. You have to be told everything, never have a thought of your own!'

So now Bulgakov is clothed and shod, has plenty to eat, takes to visiting the Kremlin and strikes up an unexpected friendship with Stalin. Stalin feels depressed occasionally and then complains to Bulgakov:

'You see, they all keep on screaming: Genius, genius! And yet there's no one I could have a glass of brandy with, even!'

Thus gradually, trait by trait, jot by jot Bulgakov moulds the figure of Stalin. And such is the power for good of Bulgakov's talent that the figure comes out humane and even to some extent pleasant and warm. One forgets, somehow, that Bulgakov's story deals with a man who brought him so much pain.

One day, Bulgakov visits Stalin tired and depressed.

'Do sit down. Why so sad? What's the matter?'

'Well, I've just written a play.'

'You ought to be pleased, if you've written a whole play. Why so sad?'

'The theatres won't produce it, Joseph Vissarionovich.'

'And where would you like to have it produced?'

'In the Moscow Arts Theatre, of course, Joseph Vissarionovich.'

'Theatres are getting out of hand! Don't you worry. Do sit down.'

Stalin takes up the telephone receiver.

'Miss! Get me the MAT, miss. The MAT! Who is this? The Director? Listen, this is Stalin. Hullo! Listen!'

Stalin is gradually losing his temper and blows energetically into the speaker.

'They are fools, in the Communications Commissariat. There's always something wrong with the telephone. Miss, get me the MAT again. Again, can't you hear?! Who is this? The MAT?

Listen, only don't throw down the receiver! This is Stalin speaking. Don't throw it down! Where's the Director? What? Died? Just this minute? Well, really! People are so nervous these days! No sense of humour!'

7
Farewell to a Training Ship

During the First World War a Norwegian sailing ship with an iron hull – an excellent ocean going vessel – went on the rocks in a bay on the White Sea.

The Russian government bought the ship from the Norwegians. After the revolution she was given the name *Tovarishch*, made into a training ship for the Merchant Navy and despatched on a round the world cruise from Leningrad in the summer of 1924. This caused a lot of excitement in the office of *Na Vakhtye*. Someone had to be sent to Leningrad to report the farewell ceremony of the *Tovarishch*. This was the first Soviet sailing ship to sail on an attractive round the world cruise. I, of course, never expected to be sent to cover the *Tovarishch*'s farewell ceremony. I realized that this privilege belonged in the first place to my sailor colleagues Novikov-Priboy and Zuzenko.

Evgeny Ivanov had a conference on the subject. Quite unexpectedly Alexander Grin[28] came to it too. I saw him then for the first and last time. I looked at him as if our office in dusty and disorganized Moscow had been visited by the captain of the *Flying Dutchman*.

Grin was tall, glum and taciturn. From time to time he smiled – faintly and politely – but only with his eyes, dark, tired and attentive. He wore a black suit, carefully buttoned up, shiny with age, and a black hat. At that time no one wore hats. Grin sat down at the table and put his hands on it – strong, knotty hands of a sailor and a tramp. The large veins on his hands swelled up.

He looked at them, shook his head and clenched his fists – the veins immediately resumed their normal size.

'Well now,' he said in a quiet, inexpressive voice, 'I'll write you a story, if of course, you give me a little money. An advance. You see? My situation is definitely tragic. I must immediately go back home to Feodosia.'

'Wouldn't you like to go to Leningrad for us, Alexander Stepanovich, to cover the *Tovarishch* farewell ceremony?' asked Evgeny Ivanov.

'No!' said Grin firmly. 'I'm ill. I need only a little bit of money, a tiny sum. For my bread, for my tobacco, for my journey. In the very first Feodosian café I'll recover. The smell of coffee, the sound of billiard balls – these will be enough. And the smoke of ships. But here – I'll simply perish.'

Evgeny Ivanov at once gave orders for an advance to be made out to Grin. For some reason we all sat in silence. Grin was silent too. I said nothing, though I wanted terribly to tell him how much beauty and interest the soaring flight of his imagination had brought into my life when I was young, what magic countries fadelessly blossomed in his stories, what oceans sparkled and roared for thousands and thousands of miles, lulling fearless young hearts. And what crowded, noisy port towns full of song and scent, flooded by the soothing sun, were turned into a great store of fairy tales and retreated into the distance like a dream, like the sound of dying female footsteps, like the intoxicating breath of happy and flowering countries discovered by no one but Grin. Thoughts chased each other without rhyme or reason in my head, I did not say a word, and time was passing. I knew that any minute now Grin would get up and go – for ever.

'What are you doing these days, Alexander Stepanovich?' asked Novikov-Priboy.

'Shoot quails with arrows in the steppe near Feodosia, on the other side of Sarygol,' replied Grin, with a little short laugh. 'For food.'

It was not clear whether he meant it or was merely joking.

He got up, said goodbye and left, tall, stern and unbending. He left for ever and I never saw him again. I only thought and wrote about him, in full realization that that was too small a tribute to express my gratitude to that man for the generous and lasting gift he had bequeathed to all dreamers and poets.

'A great man!' said Novikov-Priboy. 'A wizard. If only he could let me have a few words out of his store – how happy I'd be! I write like a cobbler. I really do. And he – you breathe in one line of his and you choke. It's that wonderful!'

Novikov-Priboy became excited and also refused to go to the farewell ceremony.

'It would only make me unhappy,' he said crossly.

It was now Zuzenko's turn. He winked at me and said he would agree to join the *Tovarishch* as her skipper. But for an old sea-wolf like him to visit the ship as a cub-reporter would be unbecoming. They could do without him.

Then Evgeny Ivanov offered the job to me. And suggested he would go too. We left the following day. I was going to the north for the first time in my life. By the time the train left Tver behind it I felt the grandeur of the forests of the north, of its faded skies and of its plains illuminated by a pale sun.

When I was a child I read in Pushkin that 'Peter's city' had arisen in gloomy forests, amid the Finnish marshes. Later that picture faded out of my mind. It was pushed out by the city's complex history, its solemn architecture, the continual presence in it of hundreds of remarkable men and women. Even before I knew Petersburg I was seeing it with their eyes.

The generation of writers, poets, artists, captains, sailors and revolutionaries, beautiful young girls and brilliant women lent 'the midnight capital' a heroic air, an air almost of unreality. Thanks to writers and poets Petersburg was peopled with spectres. But for me they were just as real as the ordinary people living in it. In my heart of hearts I believed that Eugene Onegin, Nastasia Filippovna, The Stranger, and Anna Karenina had lived there in actual fact and in this way they had enriched my knowledge of

Petersburg. I cannot picture Petersburg to myself without this multitude of complex and attractive figures.

I was convinced that in Petersburg real life and life engendered by the imagination fused inseparably into one. I felt its allure at some distance from it. As if various events similar to those that had really taken place in that city and remained fixed for ever in the memory of men would now happen to me in the city's clear air and glittering nights. So great, therefore, was my excitement as we approached Leningrad that I simply went deaf, did not hear the questions addressed to me and, in fact, looked as one possessed.

The city appeared like a vision created out of crepuscular air. A haze lay over the distant prospects of its avenues. Through it palely shone the Admiralty's legendary spire. A misty sunlight swayed on the surface of the Neva and the light breezes flitted over it, as they wafted in from the sea beyond. Long ranks of majestic buildings (I realized at once that such architectural marvels did not exist anywhere else in the world) looked slightly blurred in the northern air and had acquired a particular expressiveness. Young grass was pushing its way through the damp wooden paving blocks. That year Leningrad was entirely smokeless and clean. Almost all its factories had stopped.

Ivanov and I were driving from the station to the Vasilievsky Island in an old Ford. I was afraid Ivanov might start chatting and I should have to listen to him and make replies. But Ivanov proved an excellent chap! He never uttered a word and merely looked round through half-closed eyes. Hundreds of times before I had read and heard the words: 'On the banks of the Neva.' But I had not, of course, realized what that meant until the majestic panorama of the palaces suddenly struck my vision and the blue waters of the Neva sparkled in front of me as I drove along the long and lofty bridge.

Above that regal expanse the sun shone brightly and silence reigned supreme. Not even silence, but something greater – a mute numbness caused by all that splendour. It was very easy to

breathe. Perhaps because of the smell of the lime trees and the fact that the air was always in contact with the resin in the pine-wood paving blocks. There the lime trees seemed darker than anywhere else in the world, particularly those in the Summer Garden.

We left the car at the Naval College and entered the building, walking on the enormous crooked flag-stones which had sunk into the ground with time. We went into the cold ceremonial hall. A sailors' meeting was proceeding, in connection with the *Tovarishch*'s impending departure. Ivanov whispered to me that that hall was unique because it was swung on huge ship chains fixed to the walls. I did not believe him. I did not see any chains, yet I tried to detect the imperceptible swaying of the parquet floor. If the hall had really been swung on chains it should have swayed. But the hall stood firmly, without stirring.

Evgeny introduced me to a gay, red-haired old man – the famous skipper of sailing ships and writer of sea stories, Lukhmanov. He confirmed that the hall of the Naval College did in fact hang on chains and remarked, with perfect unconcern, that there was nothing extraordinary about this.

But I found everything around me extraordinary – the hall and the naval crests on its walls and the large models of ships, with their shiny veneer, placed on stands along the walls.

I was sitting near the model of an old battleship, observing it very closely (the model was standing at window level) and probably because of that, it suddenly seemed to shudder and dislodge itself. And soon the battleship sailed out of the window and stood at anchor in the middle of the Neva. Its flags fluttered in the wind. The ship bowed with the muzzle of its ancient cannon peeping out of the hatches.

A tugboat went past concealing it for a moment behind a smoke screen. The battleship swayed on the waves made by the tugboat, its bowsprit drawing zig-zags on the sky above and below St Isaac's Cathedral, which could be seen on the opposite bank. This optical illusion gave me pleasure as an unexpected

return of childhood impressions. Then I felt bitter regret, annoyance even. I was completely convinced that I had no right to see that splendid sight all by myself.

And later on in life I always had that sense of irremediable regret whenever I happened to be alone, far from people I was fond of – among the scorched islands of the Aegean archipelago, on the shores of Sardinia, on the dark and sparkling Tyrrhenian Sea, in the fairy tale glitter of the Paris boulevards, in Ermenonville where Jean-Jacques Rousseau died, Ermenonville as if etched into fog and the pale leaves of plane trees, on the 'planty' of Krakow and in little Bulgarian fishing towns, permeated with the smell of figs and 'clear' wine.

Ivanov called to me. We had to go to the *Tovarishch*. She was dressed in flags, moored at the granite quay. Lunch was served on deck on long tables. The tables were strewn with field flowers and ordinary grass. Just before lunch Lukhmanov called Evgeny Ivanov and me into a somewhat dark cabin with a low ceiling and oak walls, took a green, pot-bellied bottle out of a small cupboard and poured out some devilish liquid for us all. It burned my throat. Immediately I felt impregnated with some bitter astringent to the marrow of my bones. And so when I came out of the cabin the Neva suddenly swayed and almost knocked me off my feet. The spire of the Peter-and-Paul Fortress drew a wide arc across the sky, and I mistook a passing launch for a dolphin. It foamed, dived, blew a trumpet, from its sides rainbows flew off in cascades.

I was drunk after one small glass of that liquid.

'I must say you got well and truly sozzled,' said Evgeny Ivanov to me. 'Like that time in Odessa, in Captain Kosokhodov's house. Remember?'

I did remember, of course, but now I did not want to think of Odessa. Leningrad fully sufficed, so far as I was concerned. It had given me palpitations of the heart. Ivanov felt hurt for Odessa's sake, but in my view quite unreasonably. Odessa is fine so far as it goes! Let it live, roar with the carts of its street cleaners, pollute

the water of its port with water melon rinds, joke and laugh, and send up billows of smoke from frying aubergines. We all have our particular charms. Just then a new magic world had entered into me. I had to get used to it and regain my lost equanimity.

8
Free Tobacco

There are 'zones' in life one does not want to think about. And not because errors, misfortunes or failures of ours are connected with them. Failures, as my father used to say, have their good sides. No, these are not the reasons why sometimes I do not wish to recall the past. One is unwilling to think of certain years of one's life because they have added nothing to that vision of real life which everyone of us bears within him. On the contrary they may be said to have narrowed down that vision.

The summer of 1924, when I left *Na Vakhtye* and went over to work for the ROSTA[29] agency, belongs to just such a period of my life. It was Frayerman, who, after leaving Tiflis for Moscow, made me join ROSTA. At first, my earnings in ROSTA were very meagre. I was still living in Pushkino and was quite unable to arrange a more satisfactory life for myself. Every month my money came to an end about ten days before the receipt of my salary. There was just about enough for food, but nothing at all for cigarettes.

Cadging cigarettes from friends and acquaintances was unpleasant and finally impossible. This sort of practice also has its limits. Then I quite unexpectedly discovered a simple method of getting tobacco for nothing.

I would go to the railway at Pushkino and follow the line on foot, picking up all the cigarette ends and stubs thrown by passengers out of carriage windows. In the course of some three kilometres from Pushkino to Klyazma I would generally collect

up to two hundred stubs. Gradually I made useful observations regarding both stubs and smokers. Some smokers I despised, for others – few, I must say – I felt sympathy and gratitude. The ones I did not like were those who smoked their cigarettes right down to the cardboard mouthpiece. They were obviously money-conscious, mean people. On the other hand, I approved of nervous, erratic smokers, who never finished their cigarettes, and would often throw them away after one or two puffs.

At first I collected the fag ends on my own and concealed this from Zuzenko. But soon enough the observant skipper guessed from where I was getting my stocks of multi-brand tobacco and was delighted with my discovery, and we took to collecting stubs together. This was more amusing and more profitable. More profitable because Zuzenko had a skipper's sharp eye. And more amusing because the fag ends gave us food for flights of fancy, jokes and jibes, and occasional triumphs. Thus, we had a triumph when we found, lying on the line, a rubber pouch full of light tobacco, and a fat cigar – quite black and very pungent, as if soaked in saltpetre. It had probably been dropped by some foreigner – a passenger in the Siberian express ('a capitalist gaper', said Zuzenko).

Sometimes we found stubs with traces of lipstick. The impression of female lips always left a faint network of tiny furrows. Zuzenko used to say that the pattern made by these little furrows was different for every woman, just like thumb prints. Stubs like these used to cause explosions of the skipper's fancy. He considered that the lines on the lips would make it possible to find criminals and persons who had disappeared.

The colour of lipstick corresponded, according to the skipper, to the woman's character. A very red lipstick signified that she was an ardent southerner; a pink lipstick – that she was a naïve chatterbox; yellowish – that she was mysterious and masterful; bluish – that she was untidy.

Fairly soon we noticed that the number of stubs along the Pushkino-Klyazma stretch was diminishing. We would then

take the train from Pushkino to Tayninka, and from the station platform would walk along the line to Losinka. There we discovered new and rich seams of stubs.

Back home, we would cut off the charred ends, take out the clean tobacco, carefully mix it together, sprinkle it with water and heat it on a Primus stove – 'ferment' it as Zuzenko said pompously. As a result, the tobacco blend lost its bitter taste and became easy and pleasant to smoke in self-made cigarettes.

Zuzenko even suggested we should write a handbook on the preparation and processing of tobacco from cigarette ends. He considered that this would be a useful book which would have a vast success, no less than that of the *Handbook on the Robbing of Postal Trains*, published in Chicago and widely known in America. Zuzenko had read the book, and assured me it was full of very sensible advice. This may have been said in joke, but in our penurious existence this method of manufacturing tobacco proved a great help.

9
The Bird Catcher

There are three Obydensky Lanes in Moscow, all three of them pleasant. They lead down to the river Moskva and end at the deserted embankment. In the spring sickly dandelions grow along the verges.

I left Pushkino for Moscow and went to live in one of the Obydensky Lanes in the basement of an old house, formerly the property of a merchant. A basement window looked out on a garden with a high brick wall. Over that wall glittered the gold dome of the Church of Christ the Saviour with its heavy cross. There was as yet no intention of demolishing it.

Suddenly, one foggy winter day, Edward Bagritsky made his appearance in Obydensky Lane. He had come to Moscow for the first time. Hecht brought him to me directly from the station.

Bagritsky's heavy asthmatic breathing, the gurgling hoarseness of his voice and his embarrassed laughter immediately brought back to mind both Odessa and the editorial offices of *Moryak*. Unbuttoning his green duffel coat Bagritsky said, as if defining all he had known and read about Moscow until then:

'Golden domed capital! Imperial city! Asia! However, rest assured that I shall not be staying with you in the crude sense of the word. Oh no! I shall merely have my billets here!'

He was obviously putting up a bit of a swagger. But it was equally obvious that he was not sure of himself in Moscow. His friends had simply forced him to come to Moscow. Enough sitting in Odessa, they said, without ever leaving the place, with

newspapers paying him for his excellent poems some three roubles not even per line, but for each poem in its entirety. Enough of starving, of selling his possessions and dreaming of a packet of the cheapest possible cigarettes and a loaf of damp black bread.

Immediately after Bagritsky's arrival, my basement was invaded by literary boys from Odessa. The entire clan had by then moved into Moscow. The boys seized all the poems Bagritsky had brought with him – all that roaring, salty Black Sea surf, all the singing stanzas, redolent of seaweed, squashed in the palm of one's hand. The boys divided up these poems among themselves – which were typed on a broken typewriter with an old ribbon – and rushed off with them to various publishers. Bagritsky himself would never have done it. He was afraid to go out on Moscow streets. Moscow's yellow thaw made him choke. His lungs made a rattling noise, as he sat all day on the sofa, with his feet tucked under him Turkish fashion, and read aloud the poem by Selvinsky called 'Ulyalyayevshchina' – as soon as he could get his breath back.

His melodious, slightly breathless voice could be heard in the courtyard even through closed windows. Bagritsky read Selvinsky's poem in a different way each time, stressing either its rhythm or some favourite passage. I asked Bagritsky to read me his own poetry. It allayed at that time my longing for the Black Sea and for the warm air in the shade of Odessa's acacia trees which I had left behind. But he would not listen to me and continued to recite Selvinsky's poem, oblivious of all around him. At last he took pity on me and said he would read me his own poetry, not about the sea, but – light, sad verses – about invincible youth.

I did not know then that these verses were not Bagritsky's, but some other poet's. However, Bagritsky clearly did not consider this important, since he said nothing to me about it. Clearly, poetry, like air and the heat of the sun, was in his estimation the common possession of all. I even had the impression that for

example Blok's poem about the Comandatore, or Burns's 'The Jolly Beggars' or de Coster's tale of 'Till Eulenspiegel' – all these he considered had been written not just by Blok, Burns or de Coster, but also by him, Bagritsky. It all belonged to him if only because he was able to discover in it an unnoticed wealth of sounds, forms, colours and enchantments. There is a legend that some people can take a tightly curled bud in their hands, and the warmth of their hands will make it unfold and bloom with all the magnificence of which it is capable. Other men's poems would bloom in Bagritsky's hands. He was the gay lord of the kingdom of poetry. He walked along the country's meadows, knocking the pollen off tall, overblown flowers, screwing his eyes up against the sun, sowing riches with a generous hand. And perhaps the word 'singer' suited him better than 'poet'.

After Bagritsky's arrival I pretended to be sick and did not turn up at the ROSTA office for a whole week. I preferred chatting to Bagritsky all day, cooking our meagre food and listening to poetry. Once I had a bit of luck. I got a frozen perch. Bagritsky decided to fry it 'according to the Greco-Black Sea method'. This required one kilo of butter, one kilo of prunes and a lemon. This kind of expense was at that time quite fabulous, but I did not regret it.

Bagritsky rolled up his sleeves, tied a towel round his waist, moved up to the red-hot Primus an old arm-chair which had tow sticking out of it (I found the arm-chair in the wood-shed), melted all the butter in a pan and waited for it to crackle and burst in dark golden bubbles. Then in that sizzling butter Bagritsky drowned chunks of fish rolled in flour and solemnly declaimed, indeed almost sang in an oily, artificial voice, some quite unknown verses.

Oh perches cooked so splendidly in butter!
Bronzed brown on top, below and at the sides
By the ferocious heat of Primus stoves . . .

The flame was reflected on Bagritsky's brown, mediaeval face.

He was still thin at the time and looked like a young man in an Italian fresco darkened by age. Slices of white perch crackled and reddened, a bluish smoke wafted over the frying pan while Bagritsky whistled under his breath in carnivorous expectation and repeated:

'In a moment you will discover the delights of these tasty bits! Nowhere in Greece, not even on the island of Mitilenakaki would you be able to eat a perch like this.'

'World prize grub!' he repeated while we were eating that truly remarkable perch with fried prunes. 'The food of titans and caryatids!'

Then we lit *Ira* cigarettes and our day-dreams began. To me they seemed quite childish and, of course, absurd. I treated them with condescension, but in my heart of hearts believed in these dreams of Bagritsky's all the same. He spoke for some reason in the plural, but quite seriously:

'We shall get a fee. How much, now? What do you think? A thousand roubles for both of us? Or, perhaps, more?'

'More,' I said.

'Fifteen hundred!' exclaimed Bagritsky. 'Or two thousand?' he asked, frightened by his own boldness and looking at me expectantly.

'Easily!' I said with a nonchalant air. 'Quite possibly as much as three. You never know what the devil may do for you.'

'All right, three then!' said Bagritsky and bent one finger of his left hand. 'One thousand we'll send to Odessa, to Lida and Senya (his wife and son). They haven't a spoonful of butter between them. For another thousand we'll buy birds. All kinds. Then we'll spend five hundred roubles buying cages and ants' eggs for feed. And some canary seed, too. The lightest feed for birds, and with the highest calorie content. Five hundred roubles will remain till the end of the stay in Moscow and for the return journey to Odessa and for Mother.'

These day-dreams changed every day, but not very significantly. Sometimes books were added, and on this account the Odessa

thousand would be reduced to seven hundred roubles; sometimes it would be the question of an air-gun. Bagritsky enjoyed these mythical calculations. I was drawn into the game. I was only a little uncertain about the sum of five hundred roubles intended for ants' eggs and canary seed. In my mind's eye I saw mounds, vast heaps of ants' eggs. Keeping them, said Bagritsky, required a great deal of skill and a constant temperature. Otherwise, one fine day all these eggs might turn into angry red ants. They would run all over the house and take away all the granulated sugar, down to the last grain. I thought that five hundred roubles on ants' eggs was, perhaps, rather a lot.

'All right, a lot.' Bagritsky would agree. 'But do you realize what would happen to the Odessa bird handlers and bird catchers? Or to that horrid old man who used to sell me ants' eggs charging me virtually by the egg, wringing the last drop of blood out of me? I would like to see him now, that man!'

Just then one of the literary boys from Odessa, Syoma by name, came to see us. He was quite taken aback by Bagritsky's plans. His face expressed dismay. Syoma sat with us for five minutes and then simply ran away.

Bagritsky told me a lot of stories about his Odessa birds. But I knew it myself. I had visited him once in Stepovaya Street and could remember the noise, the twittering, the whistling and the chirping in cages hanging high up under the ceiling. Water would splash on one's head out of the cages as the birds washed themselves in tin troughs, fluttering their wings. According to Bagritsky these were the rarest and the most expensive of birds, though they looked very ordinary and rather pathetic.

He bought them at bazaars on the outskirts of town, caught them in the steppes and bartered them in exchange for salt and tobacco. He had nets as fine as spider webs for catching birds and various bird whistles and decoys. Catching birds in nets is a very cunning business. The bird catcher must not only know the voices and habits of birds, but also possess the art of the scene-setter. After choosing a smooth spot of ground, something like a

small threshing floor, he strews millet or bread crumbs all over it, stretches a net over it on long wooden pegs, which he camouflages, lets out a goldfinch or siskin on the threshing floor with one foot tied to a peg by a thin fishing line, and hides himself nearby. The bird hops about on the threshing floor, picks at the grain, twitters, deceives the free birds and they fly down on to the threshing floor without trepidation. The bird catcher, lying motionless in his hiding place, then pulls a string attached to the pegs and jerks them out from under the net, which collapses and covers the wretched birds.

Such were the day-dreams, but beyond the walls of the basement in editorial offices and publishing houses of Moscow something was happening that seemed to Bagritsky a miracle. Newspapers and periodicals vied with each other to get hold of Bagritsky's poems. Publishers started signing agreements with him for his books and offered advance payments. Boys, vested with powers of attorney by Bagritsky, brought money to our basement. They counted it carefully and totted up the sums on the wall next to the primus. Bagritsky never counted the money. He only glanced at the figures on the wall and said:

'In the meantime the bird bill is invisibly growing! For that money we can also buy a little boat with sails and a motor. We shall call it *Darling*, as the custom is, and will use it for the transport of the best sort of water-melons from Kherson to Odessa across the Dnieper-Bug *liman*.[30] We'll get as black as devils. Do you realize what a *liman* sun-tan is? It's the colour of brandy and gold. It is caused not only by the sun, but by its reflection in the quiet *liman* waters as well. *Limans* are often dead calm. The heat from the sun's reflection scorches you as much as the heat which comes directly from the sun's rays. It sways and it blinds you, that heat does.'

It happens occasionally that words, insignificant in themselves and heard, so to speak, casually, stick in one's mind and torment a man with increasing vigour as time goes on. So it happened with Bagritsky's words about the special, burning glitter of the

limans – wide, shallow, with a clear greenish water and low-lying grassy banks. From then on the desire to see the *limans* and stay for a while on their banks was added to the many other, equally useless desires which filled my life.

The very first summer after this conversation with Bagritsky I went off to Kherson and to the Dnieper-Bug *liman.*

I shall write separately about these places, imbued with the smell of the cirrus plant and of ancient history. I was excited even by the wreath of names connected with that *liman,* all these Kinburns, Olvins, Ochakovs, Tendras, Berezankas, Inguls and Yegorlykskayas. The names had the feel of rough-petalled flowers of the steppes or of dry bunches of thistle. These bunches had a somewhat bitter-sweet smell and, besides, they became saturated with the smell of the white-washed fishermen's huts. The bunches hung from rusty nails on their walls from one spring to the next. Here, out of this burnt up soil, peasants would sometimes plough up sonorous Hellenic vases. The paintings on them depicted the Black Sea breeze, which had blown thousands of years ago, playing with the dresses of Hellenic women. Each one of these women seemed to me to be Iphigenia who had died here in exile. The further away in time the dead person was, the more alive he became till finally he became really immortal.

A short while ago I went in the summer to another *liman* – the Dniester *liman.* One could not touch the clayey slopes of its banks with one's hand, they were so hot, but the sea beyond, sparkling green, spread coolness and foam over the sand.

The warm wine in the little shop of Shabo village made one's head swim. The cosy little town of Akkerman, which looked as if it had been built in infinitely peaceful times, gasped for breath in an atmosphere of flowering tobacco and lilac-coloured matthiola. Fishermen rowed their boats into the *liman* to catch gobies. Home woven woollen carpets were sold in the bazzar, with such flaming roses and madly green-vine leaves that the customer would quail and blanch.

Slender-waisted wasps in that bazaar hummed on one high note over baskets of grapes and plums and an old man in black glasses said confidentially:

'Mirabella plums. Pure glucose! Buy some and eat them to your heart's content in the cool of an acacia. It strengthens the blood vessels a lot.'

The little town was entirely immersed in the deep shadow of gardens, as if a green, cool tarpaulin had been stretched over it. But beyond the sharp outline of the tarpaulin the *liman* was melting in the sun and burning faces and necks. I first heard of these *liman* waters from Bagritsky. He just mentioned them, in jest perhaps, attaching no importance to his words. But the fleeting picture of *liman* waters obviously struck my imagination which tried to grasp all those things in nature which people scarcely bother to mention and only speak about casually.

Every day, as the figure of fees received grew on the wall next to the Primus, Bagritsky's day-dreams became more and more complex. Oak trees and ants' eggs no longer sufficed. He dreamed of travel and spoke of it, panting for breath. To relieve his asthma he smoked astmatol. On these occasions the basement smelt of burnt grass and valerian drops.

Bagritsky conquered Moscow at one fell swoop. The success of his poetry was stormy and universal. When evening came the crowd of people and the cigarette smoke made it difficult to breathe in the basement. As always, unexpected success brought worries with it. It turned out to be exaggerated and precarious. Bagritsky was tormented by forebodings. He said with increasing frequency that the literary boys had been trying too hard, that various editorial offices were certain to be keeping in reserve articles lambasting his poetry and that like most such articles they were written with insolent familiarity. He swore he would be accused of 'corrupt individualism' and of being an imitator and be called 'a ridiculous schoolboy'.

To the few critics in the basement Bagritsky had a guarded attitude. But only one of them caused him obvious irritation, an

importunate and impudent man, who referred to all south Russian poetry as 'aubergine jam'.

Even then Bagritsky felt depressed by the fact that perfect strangers would pester him with advice to like what he did not like and to deny what he had hankered after all his life, from childhood on. For the first time the word 'romantic' was applied to him as if it were a condemnation, though with the proviso that he deserved leniency. But all this fades into insignificance in comparison with what happened after Bagritsky's death, when he was absurdly accused of mocking at the Ukrainian people. This was silly and untrue: every line of his *Thoughts on Opanas* is filled with love for the Ukraine, for its poetry and for Shevchenko. Apart from his genuine poetry Bagritsky's weapon was his sharp tongue. He used it like a rapier to defend himself from wearisome teachers. Self-discipline and a mask of complacency sometimes concealed bitter sarcasm. But he had recourse to it only to safeguard the dignity and freedom of poetry.

At that time I had just finished a long short story with the elegant title of 'The Dust of the Land of Farsistan'. This title seemed to me very alluring, though it had no truth in it. For the action in the story took place in the extreme north of Persia (I had been there for a very short time), while Farsistan is the name given, in fact, to the southern part of the country, where I had never been. But the sonorousness of the word – Farsistan – appealed to me so much that I disregarded accuracy and shifted the name from south to north. I consoled myself with the fact that the Persian language is called 'Farsi' and, hence, all the areas of the country where that language is spoken could be called Farsistan. Babel heard of this short story and asked me to let him read it. At first, it gave me a terrible fright and I assured Babel that the story was not yet finished. But Babel was inexorable.

'In two days' time,' he said, 'I shall come back, and the story will be lying on this table here, all neat and tidy.'

And with the palm of his hand he smacked the edge of the rickety table, which Bagritsky had nicknamed a 'fragment of

Empire'. The table, in fact, was old, made of ebony, with mother-of-pearl inlay. This had obviously been long and laboriously picked at and pulled out by several generations of children. Only a few bits of the inlay had remained.

After that, Babel, laughing to himself, stood for a long time examining the record of author's fees on the wall next to the Primus and even wrote down the total on a piece of paper.

'I am pleased for you,' he said. 'At least Lida will be able to breathe more freely. You will be free from worry and are sure to write a lovely poem.'

When Babel left, Bagritsky said ominously:

'We're in for it! He has a grip of steel and the breath of a Bengal tiger. So that you may as well put your manuscript on that table at once. It must always be in its place, in case he comes when you are out. Otherwise, he'll worry the life out of you.'

'Why?'

'How should I know why? And I'm afraid he may worry the life out of me, too.'

'Why out of you?'

'Did you see that he wrote down the figures on the wall?'

'He only wrote down the total.'

'And what for? You don't know? That's just it. One can never guess what that man is thinking about. A ghastly disposition.'

Babel came back as promised – exactly two days later. While he was carefully wiping his glasses, which had misted up, and examining them in his short-sighted way, Bagritsky put his legs down from the sofa and buttoned up his coat. Babel sat down on a chair opposite Bagritsky and looked at him, his eyes laughing. Bagritsky began to fidget and turned away.

'Don't be nervous, Eddy!' said Babel. 'You'll have time enough to be nervous when I'm gone.'

'Why should I be nervous? I'm always pleased to see you.'

'Depends in what circumstances,' replied Babel, without taking his steady, good-humoured gaze off Bagritsky.

Bagritsky did not say a word. In the passage outside the

mentally defective little girl, who lived next door, was standing at the telephone holding the receiver upside down and endlessly repeating:

'I'm listening, listening, listening . . .'

She was capable of repeating this over and over again a hundred, two hundred times until someone would poke his head out into the passage and shout:

'Put the receiver down at once!'

The girl's parents had given her the magnificent name of Evolucia. But later they thought better of it, lopped off the beginning of the name and the girl remained for ever Lucia.

Anyway, Lucia's everlasting plaintive muttering: 'I'm listening, listening, listening,' added a sinister touch to life in our basement.

'Well now,' said Babel at last, 'what do you intend to do?'

Bagritsky's silence remained unbroken. Outside the door, Lucia continued her endless muttering.

'Of course,' said Babel sadly, 'you would be quite capable of spending your entire fees on the purchase of a wagon load of canary seed in Kishinev and sowing it all over Duke's Gardens.'

'And so what?' asked Bagritsky with a kind of wary challenge in his voice. 'Between you and me, there's no canary seed in Kishinev. You can only buy it in Moscow and Kaluga.'

'Now,' replied Babel, 'take all your money and put it all here. That's what.' Babel smacked the 'fragment of Empire' with the palm of his hand.

'All right then. But what will happen then?' inquired Bagritsky, by now a little nervous.

'What will happen then, will be the con-fis-cation of a certain amount,' replied Babel distinctly. 'For the purpose of sending it to Lida in Odessa.'

'It is very kind of you,' said Bagritsky politely, 'to take so much trouble about my family. But I shall personally transfer the money to Odessa this very day. And – also personally – I shall slap Syoma's face, since he chooses to be libellous about me. It was he who blabbed to you that I wanted to buy two thousand

roubles' worth of songster birds and fill up a part of Odessa with hempseed. You are the astutest man in the world and yet you've been entirely hood-winked by Syoma – a hundred per cent fibber and gimcrack.'

As a matter of fact, Syoma was not a fibber and he was not impudent. He was a sickly, freckled youth with a poor imagination. He, therefore, interpreted everything we said quite literally, took fright, immediately ran off to warn friends and caused senseless alarm.

'One hundred per cent liars don't exist,' said Babel with conviction. 'Even Mark Twain was not an absolute liar. He had a great understanding of the business, but he used to fall down on it, sometimes. Of modern writers not one can tell fibs properly. Inspired, sublime, amusing or beautiful fibs. The art of fibbing will soon be lost. The world has come to a pretty pass anyway, with seven-year-old boys defeating Capablanca at chess and able to grasp the principle of a detector receiver. And your Syoma exaggerates things five-fold, no more.'

'All right, let's admit he does,' agreed Bagritsky.

'If so, then you, Eddy, have decided, for good or ill, to spend on birds not two thousand roubles, but, say, a fifth of that sum: four hundred roubles.'

'Right!' confirmed Bagritsky.

'This cannot be allowed,' said Babel in icy tones. 'Under any circumstances. Two hundred roubles should be quite enough for you. I'm quoting a genuine price to you.'

'My last price,' said Bagritsky, 'is four hundred roubles and not a kopeck less!' He banged the 'fragment of Empire' with his hand.

'What are you saying?!' exclaimed Babel in the voice of an auctioneer. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Four hundred roubles! Who is the cretin who will give you four hundred roubles?!' And Babel, in his turn, smacked the 'fragment of Empire' with the palm of his hand. 'Three hundred roubles, and that's that!' It was a game they were now playing. Babel invented

it on the spur of the moment, to let himself out of the awkward situation he had got into. He turned an unpleasant conversation into a joke. Bagritsky took it up. It was timely, saving Babel from an open quarrel with Bagritsky. It saved the situation. But this seemed to them not enough to smooth down the awkwardness between them. And as always in such cases, in order to change the subject, the two men seized on the first thing they noticed. Unfortunately, that was my manuscript, 'The Dust of the Land of Farsistan'. I bravely drew upon myself the full fire of questions and remarks hurriedly thought up by Babel and Bagritsky on the subject of the manuscript.

At last Babel took it and we all went out together. Bagritsky went to the post office to send the money to Odessa, I went with him, and Babel tactfully disappeared after winking at me.

One gloomy, pre-spring morning (all mornings in the basement appeared gloomy), Bagritsky got up, breathed out noisily and said:

'My billeting here has come to an end! The day after tomorrow I'm off to Odessa.'

He was looking forward to going back to Odessa like a child. His lungs were in need of Black Sea salt. In Moscow he found it increasingly difficult to breathe, but did not complain. The worse he felt the more he laughed at himself. Waking up at night I would see him sitting on the sofa, with his arm round his knees, coughing painfully and wheezily and then gasping for breath with his mouth convulsively open. I would get up, put a little saltpetre and some kind of dry herb in a piece of newspaper and burn the lot on a plate. I would then boil some tea on the Primus. The hot tea together with the acrid smoke had a soothing effect on Bagritsky and helped him, he said, to breathe freely once more.

It took a long time for him to fall asleep (he slept in a semi-sitting position), and after each of these nocturnal tea sessions we went on talking till morning.

Bagritsky told me once that asthma was a disease typical of the Jewish poor classes, of Jewish *shtetls*, constricted and crowded

flats, impregnated with the smell of onions, dry pepper and something pungent and sour. This sour smell had no name. It appeared by a process of autogenesis, as Bagritsky put it, in the atmosphere of pathetic artisan workshops and was just as loathsome as the smell of formic acid. Everything was saturated with it – the old men's frock-coats, the old women's red-brown wigs, all the ramshackle furniture, all the sumptuous and stuffy cushions in faded pink covers, all the food. Even the tea gave off the same sour taste, as if it had been oxidized through contact with the copper *samovar*. Bagritsky said that whenever he got into the smoke and steam of the workshops, and breathed in the smell of leather, calico and blow torches he immediately had a savage attack of asthma.

It would go completely only on those warm days by the sea when you could dip your hand into the water and not feel cold, and it was possible to lie face downwards on the hot stones of the breakwater in the harbour and get warm through and through – from the sun above, and the heat of the barnacles below. He spoke with longing of those tiny details of a carefree Odessa summer which always brought about a state of blissful happiness.

He invited me to come to Odessa in the summer and promised to take me to the Sukhoy *liman* and to the remarkable fishing village of Kara-Bugaz, somewhere near the Dniester *liman*. I went to Odessa in the summer (I shall speak of that later) and saw it all.

But soon Bagritsky took up permanent residence in Moscow and lived in Kuntsevo among the damp and rather melancholy cottage allotments and stunted birches.

I always considered his move to the north to have been ill-advised, but never had the courage to say so to his friends and relations. I considered it ill-advised because a poet cannot be torn away from his grass roots, from the complex conjunction of things simple and yet dear to him. Out of them, in its own unfathomable ways, poetry is born. Or rather the 'sub-text' of

poetry – that ultra-sound not discernible to the ear, which sooner or later pierces the envelope of muteness and appears among us, sad or solemn or full of joy.

I used to visit Bagritsky in Kuntsevo and invariably felt sorry and embarrassed. Like a large broody bird he sat on a sofa with his legs tucked under him, Turkish fashion, just as he did in my damp basement in Obydensky Lane. He sat and joked all the time, and laughed, though now and then his eyes reflected an intense longing for the steppes stretching away into misty sunsets, for the infinite waves on wild beaches gaily racing each other, for the sun flashing through the vines and for Odessa's streets so copiously watered in the early morning.

And, of course, for the morning warbling of birds nesting in the sea cliffs under the roots of tamarisks and acacias.

10
A Tricky Problem

Ever since I had started working in ROSTA I tried to put up a resistance against everything capable of soiling the inner world I carried within me and tried to communicate to others. Most of all I was afraid of becoming contaminated by that exhausted and impotent language which at that time was spreading relentlessly and swiftly.

The fact that almost unconsciously I put linguistic monstrosities out of my mind obviously, as time went on, enabled me to become, in some measure, a writer. Disgust with corrupted language grew within me for a long time and turned into a loathing. For many words, neologisms – hundreds of them – I experienced the sort of loathing I felt for hooligans. And not merely because they clashed with the whole character of the Russian language, but also because they were the expression of ignorance and absence of national qualities.

Language must always suit the nation. It must define its face, its beauty, its character as graphically as does the actual landscape of the country, a hill rising gently and losing itself in the evening mist over a river, so dear to one that it makes the heart throb. You do not need much to guess you are in Russia. It is enough to see the way bluetits shake the lemon-coloured leaves of aspens along river banks, and make them float down to the ground. Possibly my attitude to language is too strict, too reverent. But it cannot be otherwise. Had it been I should have taken up book-keeping or something of that sort. The Russian language

exists like a collection of great poetry, as unexpectedly rich and pure as the blaze of a starry sky over a forest waste.

By the time I started work in ROSTA I had already had several short stories published, most of them written in a hurry. Each of them took me an evening or two to write and I had a somewhat light-hearted attitude to them. The stories were a tribute to my childhood, mainly to that nebulous admiration for sailors and the sea which overwhelmed me when I was still in Kiev and first met a midshipman from the *Azimuth*.

True enough, the long short story 'The Romantics' had already been written by then. But I did not consider it worthy of publication yet. I let it lie in my drawer for many years – so many that the manuscript became tattered and its pages turned yellow. Some fairly felicitous phrases and ideas were scattered about a number of stories and were lost in them.

I knew that a genuine writer must write clearly and naturally, and must express his attitude to life and people with absolute boldness and energy. A few good passages do not suffice. Besides I did not really believe in the excellence of my good passages. At first blush I liked them, but soon tired of them and thought them lifeless. I was even ashamed of them. But it was not this that worried me most during the first few years. Attempts to improve the language and my first successes – all this was so to speak 'in the order of things'. What worried me were the failures. Gradually, as I have just said, I came to regard almost all my early short stories as failures.

There is nothing worse than a nail driven into the wall and bending. One has no confidence in it. My semi-successful stories resembled in some inexplicable way a mass of nails more or less bent. To try to improve them was useless – everyone knows that try as you might to straighten out a nail it will still remain crooked, be it only slightly. Stories are just the same. There are stories which are well-written, but empty, like an apple rotten at the core. Empty because contrived or rather excogitated, because

they have nothing of real life in them, but a few crumbs, while everything else is gathered in from all sides and hastily sewn together with rotten thread. The thread is liable to break at any moment and the story fall apart. That was the feeling most of my writings gave me, and this depressed me. Every time I sat down to write a new story I was firmly resolved to be ruthless with myself and not leave the world of reality for the world of artificial things. But every time a blind inner force of inertia compelled me to proceed along the line of least resistance, to adopt some external subject and to yield to my propensity for extraordinary situations, extraordinary people and circumstances.

Re-reading a story only just completed, 'The Queen of Holland', for example, or 'Black Nets' or 'A Conversation under Pouring Rain', I noticed it was made of good quality waste, but waste all the same, the waste of whichever writer took my fancy at the time (Joseph Conrad, for instance, as Babel was the first to point out to me). But, all in all, the story 'held together', it was sometimes easy to read and even interesting, and this gave me a spurious reassurance.

'What's the matter, then?' I would ask myself. 'Why can't I make up my mind to cross it all out and throw it into the waste-paper basket?'

While I was writing a new story all seemed to go smoothly, but later, turning it over in my mind, particularly at night, I could not sleep, found much that was flimsy in it and cursed myself for having sent it off for publication.

My work was, as yet, published mostly in newspapers. Newspapers required stories written promptly. Ever since, I have remained nervous of quick publication.

For this reason I made it a rule not to publish things without letting them settle, like sediment in a solution, and allow the liquid to sparkle in all its crystalline and cold purity. This elementary rule has been confirmed by the experience of many writers. I grasped the significance of Pushkin's words about 'improving the fruits of treasured thoughts'. Those six words contained

astoundingly clear and precise advice or, perhaps, an order to all who write.

So my efforts began for all my writing to be derived from genuine reality, an effort to make this reality merge indissolubly into free imagination. And at this point a new teacher appeared, besides Babel – Mikhail Prishvin.[31] I read his story 'Shoes' about shoemakers who tried to make slippers for the woman of the future. The whole story was based on absolute reality, even on everyday life, but at the same time it was subject to a touch of fancy.

Thus a second rule was born for me: the story of life in all its manifestations and of man whatever his qualities, becomes true art when it is bound with real experience and at the same time with imagination and inspiration. I was convinced I had found the right way leading to the writer's difficult, and for me ever wonderful, labour of which I had dreamt so long and yet in vain. I found it almost instinctively, for I was never capable of long and consistent thought.

The way was found and it brought me to my first, as my friends called it, 'real' book – *Kara-Bugaz*.

II
The Woodsman

For a long time I watched Prishvin from afar, afraid of meeting him, or coming face to face with the man I thought of as a sorcerer and a sage. He seemed to exude the smell of thawing water in a wood of angelica's pungent juice, of rotten leaves and branches in a forest, of twilight over marshes. He was always hiding somewhere in impenetrable Russian forests, like a peasant-woodsman, unbelievably crafty and so sharp that no bird, however cunning, could possibly escape him. We did meet later, but never formed a close friendship. He had a quality which does not usually make for close friendship: he had his own language, not always comprehensible to others, for the expression of his own, quite special thoughts. He had something in him reminiscent of an old gypsy, not only in his appearance but also in his easy knowledge of the country, peculiar to born tramps.

Prishvin once told me that everything he had published was absolute trash compared to his diaries. He kept them all his life, and it was these that he wanted most of all to leave to future generations. After Prishvin's death a part of the diaries was published, and judging by that, it was a vast and remarkable work, full of poetic thoughts and short, unexpected observations, of such depth that two or three lines out of Prishvin's diaries would, if expanded, suffice to make a whole book in the hands of another author.

If there is a sub-text in literature – a secondary meaning to things, an alternative vision of them, reflecting the basic sound

like an echo and confirming it in our consciousness – then Prishvin had discovered a sub-text in Russian nature as well. The secret of this sub-text consisted in that his personal, very intimate feeling for a heath, for animals, for clouds, for rivers, for dense shrubs, for the second blossoming of buckthorn, merged with nature and gave it a peculiar, Prishvinesque appearance. Prishvin himself existed like a phenomenon of the Russian landscape. He was the master of our land by right of his love for it, by right of his knowledge of it, and like all masters was also a little bit its owner, but in a special sense.

He cared for and guarded the land as if he were its owner, not for himself, but for the sake of art and future generations. He guarded it because he knew the ennobling power of virginal land. He wanted to preserve for mankind something, if only in bits and pieces, of that land as it was when first created, so that man could breathe the air of the yet untouched corners of the globe and see the land's freshness which is so quickly sullied and tarnished under layers of dust and smoke.

He was, therefore, very cross with me for having written *The Meshchery Country* and thus attracted to Meshchery's forests people's close and, unfortunately, fatal attention with its inevitable and grievous consequences: crowds of tourists, trampling to death places formerly so fresh, and squads of practical men who immediately started adapting that area so as to extract the maximum profit out of it.

'You know what you've done with all that enthusiasm of yours for Meshchery?' he said to me reproachfully, rebuking me as if I were a thoughtless boy. 'In your quiet Solotcha they are now building hundreds of holiday cottages for people from Ryazan. Try to find a single larkspur flowering in a meadow. Just you go and look for it! You damn well won't find it. Touch beauty with a careless hand, and it'll disappear for ever. Your contemporaries will, perhaps, be grateful to you, but your children's children are not likely to thank you for it. And yet how much latent power there was in Meshchery for the development of a fine national

spirit of poetry! You are a very rash fellow, my dear chap! You've failed to take care of your primitive kingdom.'

He was right. Today you probably cannot find a larkspur in Meshchery however hard you try. At first I was taken aback by Prishvin's anger. And even a little indignant. How could he think everything should be for oneself and nothing for others! What's so good and worthy about concealing from men things of beauty? But I soon discovered that Prishvin was saying all this because he cared for the good of humanity and was anxious that it should not be deprived. He thought many years in advance, while we are in the habit of thinking only of today – it is in this way that we are selfish.

12
Copper Horseshoes

Mayakovsky[32] was lying on a low dais in the Reception Hall of the Writers' House. The house stands at the end of a courtyard amid lilac bushes. It was said that Tolstoy described this old mansion in *War and Peace* as the house of the Rostovs. The windows in the Reception Hall were open. The Medici Venus with its mannered pose was covered by a black sheet. Out of it peeped one cold marble knee.

Mayakovksy lay in his coffin on the dais as if in a stone sarcophagus – heavy, tall, still thinking his thoughts. He lay with his feet towards the exit and the people who crowded round the coffin, so that the first things they saw were his heavy shoes with little copper horseshoes on the heels, that glistened in the sun and looked very worn. The poet walked on this earth heavily and a little carelessly, and quickly wore down the copper tips. It probably occurred to many people at the time that those cheap little horseshoes would never decay while the poet's bodily remains would disappear. And yet people needed not only his poems, but the man himself, alive and thundering.

April, in the year of his death, was unusually warm in Moscow. Steam was rising from the damp earth in the front garden. It stirred the rotting leaves left from last year. The leaves were black and smelled of sourish wine. They could not be used to make a wreath for the poet.

Someone had placed a few such leaves instead of a wreath at his

feet in the coffin. They were not lost among hothouse chrysanthemums and carnations, among silk ribbons, branches of Thuya and of fir which gave out the odour of turpentine. The leaves were lying there as of right. One of them was stuck to the sole of his shoe and afterwards was consumed, together with Mayakovsky, by the funerary flames.

The hardest thing to bear about death for those who remain behind is the fact that they had not had time to tell the dead man the main thing they had thought and felt about him. Those that loved him were, as always, too late. An incomprehensible shyness sealed their lips. And now he would, of course, never know how disinterested had been their love. Could it have saved him, perhaps? But he never said a word before his death, never expressed his last sorrow to anyone. He was lying, frowning a little, and had told no one of the pain and distress which life had dealt him – a poet strong in spirit and sure of himself.

Oh yes, he did indeed 'step on the throat' of his own song.* He performed a heroic act of poetic self-sacrifice for the sake of his country's and his people's good. He had been a workman, an agitator, a fighter. He had assumed the heavy task of grafting the revolution on everyday human life. Gentleness was not appropriate here. There was too much sloth all round. It was essential to lash out at fatuity, stupidity, obtuseness and dumb-wittedness. It was essential to scream at people so as to make them come to their senses and crawl out of their warm nests. It was essential simply to kick people out of these nests, out into the cold, sharp wind of revolution. Particularly poets. Not for nothing did he write in 1921:

In the Soviet melting pot lies
A thin layer of mould
And from behind the back of the RSFSR
Peeps out the bourgeois' snout.

* A phrase out of a poem by Mayakovsky.

He wrote his poems as if he were wielding a hammer – with his sleeves rolled up.

Esenin[33] had said that it was 'no new thing in this world to die, and no newer, of course, to live.' The hopelessness of these words seemed to Mayakovsky shocking. But only five years passed since Esenin's death – and he too called death in and settled finally all his accounts with life. Why? Who knows?

Mayakovsky was carried along Vorovsky Street, the street of foreign embassies. The flags over the embassy buildings were flying at half-mast. Even enemies were paying tribute to his poetic power, his political temperament, his straightforwardness which made him into a people's tribune. Once he was dead they had obviously ceased to worry and no longer attached any significance to the striking power of his word. They simply did not know that frequently, very frequently, the word inspires ever greater terror as time goes on. It cannot be rendered harmless, even by sinking it to the bottom of the ocean, like the attempts to render harmless atomic waste. It will always break through the film of well-being and security enveloping life and explode here and there.

I had hardly known Mayakovsky.

After my return from wandering in the south I spent a whole year in Pushkino along the Northern Way. At the back of my house stood a thick pine forest, and beyond it stretched low-lying marshes, and a small river flowed, always shrouded in mist. I spent the whole winter alone in that house, and in the summer the poet Aseyev[34] with his wife and her cheerful Ukrainian sisters came to live in it. Then the kindly Semyon Hecht rented an empty attic in which the landlord's goats slept at night, and all this inaugurated a noisy and free country-cottage life.

Mayakovsky was living on Akula Hill at the time and often turned up to play chess with Aseyev. He would stride through the forest, twirling in his hand a stick made of hazel-wood. I thought

he had a sullen look about him and always tried to be out of his way. I was excessively shy. I had the impression that Mayakovsky would simply not find it interesting to talk to me. What could I say to him that would be new and significant? Everything had already been said; he had studied and learned all about world civilization and weighed it up in the course of sharp and witty arguments. I knew this because I could hear all the conversations which went on in Aseyev's room.

Once, when Aseyev had gone to Moscow, Mayakovsky knocked at my door and suggested a game of chess. I was a bad player. I was incapable of foreseeing the game several moves ahead. But I agreed and went to Aseyev's room. His wife Oksana, her golden hair loose round her shoulders, was sitting on a divan with her legs tucked up under her. I very much admired Aseyev's poem dedicated to her and called 'Okzhemir' according to the first syllable of each of the three words in the first line. This became Oksana's nickname.

Okzhemir said that she was sick of the sight of men brooding over a chess board. Mayakovsky merely giggled and I did not utter a word.

We had to talk about something. With every minute that passed the silence became increasingly difficult to bear. Thoughts, mainly stupid thoughts, drifted through my mind in snatches. I could not think of anything to say in order to begin a conversation. Mayakovsky was silent, with a cigarette held tightly in a corner of his mouth, and looked at the board. For some reason Okzhemir was silent too. Then in utter despair I began a conversation about catching crayfish in the river Serebryanka. There were, in fact, huge crayfish in that river – real crocodiles they were.

'A boring business,' said Mayakovsky. 'I can't understand how people can bother with such nonsense!'

I blushed and was unable to say a word to the very end of the game. Fortunately for me Aseyev came back and I escaped to my own room. From then on I was afraid of famous people and am

still afraid of them. I have always felt free and easy only in the company of very simple people. Among writers there were very few such people. Ilf, it is true, was very simple and friendly, Andrey Platonov[35] was simple and sad.

When I first got hold of one of Platonov's short stories and read the sentence: 'It was quiet in provincial Russia' I felt a lump in my throat, it was so good.

Scarcely anything by Platonov was published. If ever on some rare occasion, a story by him appeared anywhere he was immediately buried under an avalanche of ridiculous accusations. Platonov wrote a short story called 'A Thunderstorm in July'. I do not think I know anything in modern literature more clear, more classical and more winning in its charm. Only a man for whom Russia was his second self, like one's parental home where every nail is familiar, could write about her with such bitterness and such warmth.

He was a hardy man, Platonov, 'well-tempered'. Very ill, he spat blood, lay motionless for months, spitting blood, but never sinned against his writer's conscience.

In the first years of the Revolution the hearts and minds of youth were ruled over by Mayakovsky and Sergey Esenin. I had never had the luck of getting to know Esenin while he was alive: I came back to Moscow a short time before his death. When I did see Esenin he was lying in his coffin in the House of Journalists in Nikitsky Avenue. A black sheet, indicating mourning, was stretched across the Avenue. The words 'The body of a great national poet is lying here at rest' were written on the sheet in white letters. The day was dark, with low motionless clouds, sullenly silent. On days like these people light lamps in their houses earlier than usual, and the light of these lamps looks like the yolk of an egg.

Chandeliers were lit in the large room where Esenin was lying. In their dim light Esenin's face appeared beautiful. His beauty was made particularly striking by the dark shadows cast by his

eyelashes. He was lying like a boy asleep. The sound of women sobbing seemed loud and inappropriate – they might have awakened him. But he could not be woken – so serene and deep was his sleep, exhausted as he was by the chaotic absurdity of life, by the confusion of his rapid fame, by a longing for his native Ryazan.

Much later, in 1960, I saw a photograph of Esenin when he had just been taken out of the noose. He was lying on his side on a sofa with his knees up, and his face was bathed in tears. They had not yet had time to dry. His face expressed so much childish grief that no one could look at that photograph. All turned away their heads, and departed, averting their eyes.

I owe a lot to Esenin. He taught me to appreciate the unpretentious and spacious Ryazan country – its wide river landscape with the blue mists in the distance, its bare willows through which the October wind goes whistling, its withered nettles, its rain, its milky-white smoke over the villages, its wet calves with surprised eyes, its empty roads leading to unknown destinations. I spent several years in Esenin's country in the neighbourhood of the river Oka. It was a vast world of sadness and quiet, of weak sunlight and of forests full of brigands.

Once every three or four days a cart would rumble along the rotting brushwood thrown on the surface of the marshes by way of road, or a girl's face would appear for a moment at the window of a forester's cottage. Ah, to stop and go into the cottage, gaze at the dark and troubled eyes – and continue on one's way to the sound of pine trees, the tremor of autumn aspens, the rustle of coarse-grained sand trickling into a rut in the road. And to look at flocks of birds, stretching in the misty sky above the forest out towards the warm south. And have such sweet yearnings induced by one's own close kinship, one's intimacy with this country of impenetrable forests. Limpid springs flow out of the marshes and one cannot but feel that each such spring is a fount of poetry. And it is indeed so. Dip a tin cup into such a spring, blow the reddish bilberry leaves to one side of it, and have a drink of this

water which gives you youth and freshness and an everlasting charm of your native land. And you will find that only a small part of their poetry is expressed in the poems of poets such as Esenin; all its untold wealth is still hidden, still waiting for its hour to strike.

The other day I was reading some poems by the entirely forgotten woman poet Rastopchina, a contemporary of Pushkin's and Lermontov's. I found the two remarkable lines:

Thus Russian poets fulfil their destined fate:
They do not sing their swan-song to the end.

These words contained no more than a statement of fact. Insults, duels, calumny, jealousy, bad temper – all this was the outward expression of their tragedy.

It is understandable that a man should decide to leave this life out of despair and tiredness. But there is probably nothing strange in the fact that a man can also leave this life out of a consciousness of moral fulfilment, when this fulfilment reaches such perfection that the days that follow bring with them nothing but a decline and a waning of powers. I cannot recall any cases like these, but I admit that they may happen.

Dull winter days, fields clothed in snow at night, leaden greyness all around, the scrunching of frozen oak leaves outside – and he* alone, alone in these sleepless nights without inspiration. Memories alone, fruitless and full of anguish, continue to live. Nothing can be called back, lived again.

And suddenly a distant clatter of hooves. Someone galloping up from afar. To him. Bringing what news? At the porch the rider jumps off his horse and a moment later Pushkin is holding a note. She has come! She is waiting for him in Trigorskoye. Anna![36]

* The reference is to the poet Pushkin, then living on his estate in the country.

It is as if a meteor had suddenly lit up the deserted forests, the ramshackle cottages, the dark and lonely nights.

This dream about Pushkin or 'vision' as they used to say in the old days, took such firm root in me that I often saw it when fully awake, and could have described it in all its simple detail.

13
Devonian Limestone

At the edge of a crunchy strip of snow, where tiny rivulets of thawing snow were just beginning to trickle, I noticed the first snowdrop. Its white, diaphanous petals, crumpled after their winter sleep, were straightening themselves out in the sun, with an occasional shudder.

First spring! *Prima vera*! When at school we were painstakingly cramming Latin, these two melodious words and they alone helped us – but only a few of us – to make peace with that language. *Prima vera* – the first almost childish spring. The spring when the pointed little blades of grass have not yet crawled out of the earth and are seen only in damp little cracks. There they hide from night frost.

A quiet sun on a windless day was warming the earth (this was near the little town of Livny, in the Orlov province), and was calmly shining over the vast expanse of Russia. In the ravines outside the town, water from the thawing snow was burbling angrily away. Fearless cockerels were screaming their heads off in the distance, which was swathed in the smoke curling out of the chimneys of the little suburban quarters of Streletsk and Yama. They were welcoming the return of the warm weather, and exulting over their long life – the cockerels probably thought they were immortal on this earth, as immortal as men.

I asked for a few days' leave and went off to Livny to stay with some old friends of my mother's. I went for no particular purpose

or reason. I wanted to draw breath again after my difficult life in Pushkino and the long Moscow winter.

In the house I went to in Livny, lived the widow of a doctor, Shatsky by name, together with her daughter, also a doctor, and her geologist son. After an expedition to the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea the geologist, Alexey, suffered an acute form of nervous breakdown, and was now resting in his mother's house in Livny. The Shatskys lived in an old timber house near the railway.

The geologist did not like sitting in one place. He wandered about the town and the surrounding fields with, as his companions, a young girl called Taya, the daughter of an engine-driver, and me.

Sometimes we were also accompanied by his sister Nina, an outwardly stern but basically kind, short-sighted woman of forty, who was decisive in everything to do with the medical profession, and was in love with it, just as her father had been. His fame as a selfless and dedicated doctor lived on for a long time after him in Livny, in Yeletz and even in Oryol.

His widow and children had a veneration for him. His memory was held in high esteem not only because he had been a gifted doctor, but also because he had belonged to the Populist movement, and had idolized Chernyshevsky.[37] The walls of his study, where they put me up on a sofa, were covered with photographs of young men, all of them looking like the writer Garshin,[38] with long hair and little curly beards, and of girls in black tight silk bodices and puff sleeves and tightly pulled-back hair. All the girls had very Russian, open faces and grey eyes. Of course one could not tell the colour of their eyes in the photographs, but I imagined them to be grey. The colour suited the girls' friendly faces and the half-smiles on their lips.

My own childhood was passed in a family where life was unstable and troubled, among furniture of all shapes and sizes from various temporary flats, and this, perhaps, was why I was so exceptionally fond of houses such as the Shatskys'. In houses

like those one could fully relax. Silence, occasionally brightened by the laughter and the voices of young people, the calm and the quiet, and the slight bustle of holidays, potted rubber-plants casting their shadows on old sofas, the thin squeak of oil lamps in the evenings, many old books and magazines, the slight smell of medicines as is only right in a doctor's house. The garden outside, and beyond the garden – the railway, the station, the occasional rattle of goods trains and the loud puffing of old engines. I always thought that when they were near their stations they made it their business to puff so strenuously and work away so conscientiously with their connecting rods, to show that no one else could work quite as hard. The cosy aroma of evening tea, mingling with the light steam of the samovar, jam, always of some special kind ('You'll never believe it, Taya was able to get ten kilos of granulated sugar in Oryol'), either out of Chinese apples or out of blackberries – all this and hundreds of other little details created an atmosphere of cosiness without which no man can be happy. It was fashionable at one time to speak disparagingly of 'cosiness': it was supposed to give people a false sense of security and well-being.

'Thank God it does give them a sense of well-being,' old Mrs Shatsky would say, 'at least it gives them time to think a little and get back their morale. All these questions of yours or problems or whatever, are quite enough to undermine anyone's health. You'd better have a cup of tea with cherry jam and go to the pictures. They say there is a marvellous film on about a dress cutter from Torzhok. Taya fairly burst her sides laughing.'

The window of the doctor's study gave out on to such vast stretches of landscape and soft, rounded hills that the heart missed a beat every time one looked out. And at the foot of all those downs and hills flowed the river Bystraya Sosna, stretching under the railway bridge like a ribbon made wide by the spring waters. It was a quick-flowing river, a rapid stream of a river, carrying with it the last, brown blocks of ice, rustling especially

loudly at night and rising, hour by hour, swaying and flooding the willow bushes along its banks.

Fluffy little buds (we called them 'lambkins') sat next to each other on the willow branches, like so many tiny yellow-breasted sparrows. They had fluffed out just in time for Easter Sunday.*

The snow along the river banks had already melted, but further on it was still lying in a thick layer on the edges of fields. The geologist explained it by saying that at Livny, Bystraya Sosna flowed through thick strata of Devonian limestone and the limestone conserved the heat of epochs many millions of years old. That heat oozed out of the soil and poisoned the inhabitants of Livny.

That was why, said the geologist, so many primitive beliefs were still extant in that little town even though seven years had passed since the Revolution. He told me that barren women in Livny bought live pike from fishermen, put them in troughs filled with water and stared for a long time – for not less than two hours at a stretch – at the pike's cruel yellow eyes. It was supposed to help. And old women chewed pieces of limestone from the grave of the village idiot Peter-the-Rooster. That also was supposed to help. Taya would give a little scream and look at me nervously, hoping I would not believe all this.

Whenever the geologist launched out on the theme of the Devonian limestone Nina would signal to me unobtrusively that I should listen and not argue. And old Mrs Shatsky would smooth the table cloth on the dining-room table with a trembling hand. The fatal exhalation of the Devonian limestone was the geologist's harmless little mania. But, all in all, he was a good-natured man, very silent and quite inoffensive.

The windows had been double-glazed for the winter, but on the day following my arrival the inner frames were removed. The breath of the damp, sun-warmed garden streamed into the

* The reference is to the Russian custom of decorating rooms and churches with willow branches at Easter time.

room, bringing with it a faint smell of vanilla and the reminder of the approach of Easter. The sprouting oats seedlings sown in earthenware plates on every window-sill looked like so many juicy green brushes.

Old women trudged to churchyards, carrying wreaths made of coloured wood shavings – there were no flowers yet, it was too early in the year. These artificial wreaths and flowers (especially the large shiny roses) were very skilfully made by the Livny women. They were famous for it all over the area. To colour the wood shavings they used aniline dyes – bright and unpleasant.

Every day the geologist took Taya and me for walks in the country. Taya was a nice girl who limped, had light round eyes and a thick plait of light brown hair. There was something wrong with her thyroid gland (naturally according to Alexey, due to the radiation given off by the Devonian limestone). Nina had been treating her for a long time, hoping to cure her completely and then send her to the medical technical college in Yeletz.

Taya asked me shyly (she was slightly afraid of the geologist) about Moscow, the Black Sea, the Crimea, about the trees that grew there and whether it was true that if you go up the mountains you can reach warm clouds. Sometimes she asked me whether I had ever seen Lenin and Leo Tolstoy, Gorky, Mayakovsky and Chaliapin. I lied and said I had, though I had not seen either Tolstoy or Gorky. I liked the rapturous delight in her eyes – the excitement of it even made her choke and lisp a little. I told her all these things in just the way she wanted to hear about them.

Fortunately, the geologist paid no attention to our conversation during these walks and Nina did not hear them or I would have been severely rapped over the knuckles for lying. Nina was an ardent defender of the truth at all costs.

'I have a doctor's mind,' she would say, 'I can't understand in what way it profits a man to tell lies, even the pleasantest possible lies. Any kind of truth is better than a lie. More human, too.'

I did not argue with her, but considered, of course, that I was right and she was wrong.

In the course of one of our Sunday walks in the country we met a young soldier on the bank of the Bystraya Sosna. He was sitting on a dry log, cutting a simple little shepherd's pipe out of a willow branch. When we came up to him, he stood up to mark his respect for his elders and stood to attention.

'Oh!' he said, obviously embarrassed, and blushed. 'Good morning, I'm cutting things out, you see . . . playing about really . . .'

We sat down on the log and lit cigarettes. The soldier, not venturing to join us, kept on standing until Taya pulled him down by the sleeve of his coat. The pipe and knife he hastily hid in the pocket of his great-coat. A military unit was stationed in Livny and the soldier probably belonged to it.

'A recent recruit, are you?' asked Alexey.

'That's right,' said the soldier readily. 'Kassian Zvonaryov is the name. From Olonetsk. I've only just come here.'

The Olonetsk Province had always attracted me. My love for the geography of Russia came over me in fits and starts: at one time I would read all I could find about Belorussia, then about the Transcaspian steppes, later I became enthusiastic about the north and could not tear myself away from Maksimov's somewhat dry and leisurely book *A Year in the North* and descriptions of the northern monasteries.

'There was a good man once – Kassian of Krasivaya Mech,[39]' said Alexey and smiled, which he very rarely did. 'And you we shall now call Kassian of the Bystraya Sosna. All right?'

'Not really,' said the soldier. 'Kassian of the Transonega, that's me. Have you ever heard of the Transonega?'

'I have,' said Alexey. 'A granite sort of country.'

'That's right! We have lots of granite there. And lakes. But that's not what we are proud of.'

'And what is it you are proud of?' I asked.

'Carpentry work. Our peasants have only axes to build their houses with and they don't use any nails; dowel-pins – that's all they use. And we have our churches built like that, too – any number of them. Specialists came once – educated folk – to try and count them. Couldn't do it – too many of them. My grandfather is a carpenter, my dad's a carpenter, I am a carpenter's apprentice, and my grandmother – she is the best assistant our fellows have.'

'Does the old woman do carpentry too?' asked Taya in surprise.

'No, not that. But all our houses are covered with lace, like scarves. See what I mean? Wooden lace. And every man tries to give his house a different kind of ornament or different pattern to his neighbours'. But to make a wooden ornament you must have a special gift. A great gift. Grandmother has that gift. She draws patterns sometimes that not everyone can fret out afterwards. Even great masters will refuse, won't take on one of her patterns.'

'And how does she work?' asked Taya.

'Just dreams to begin with. Sits outside the porch till midnight and has longings. Our summer nights are all alight, all white. A man's breath is so light on nights like these, it's all so unreal. There she will sit, dreaming away, and then suddenly she will start singing something old, very old and drawn out, not church music, but something general, ancient. From Novgorod times. And when she has finished singing she takes a bit of charcoal and draws an ornament on whatever comes to hand. And every ornament has a name of its own. One is called a "Scroll", and another "Grass", and a third "Cocks crowing to each other".'

He fell silent. 'Forgive me, I've been speaking too much.'

'Devonian limestone exudes poison,' said Alexey sternly, 'while granites, gneiss and all these coarse-grained magmatic rocks breathe out strength, sharp-sightedness, tenacity.'

'True enough,' agreed Kassian, 'people in my part of the world

have very sharp sight indeed. That's why they take them for the navy mostly, sea service. It's just me who didn't make it, and they've sent me out to these fields and valleys. And the water is cloudy, lots of clay about.'

'You should play something for us,' said Taya, 'something on your pipe.'

'Certainly, if you want me to.'

The soldier took out his pipe, examined it for a long time, turned it over and over in his fingers, then put it to his lips and started playing, a thin, plaintive note, as if some migratory bird were calling for someone and were imploring someone to listen to its misfortunes. We sat and listened.

Then Kassian took us to the railway crossing, clanging along in his heavy boots, thanked us for something, said goodbye and went.

'I'm sorry for him,' said Taya suddenly. 'He's only a boy. And very pale, too.'

'That's because of spring,' replied the geologist. 'The spring air in Livny contains a lot of Devonian limestone exhalations.'

It seemed to me that the spring was responsible for everything about that northern boy – his pallor, his shy, gentle gaze and particularly the quiet warbling of his pipe. It was as if weak little stems of spring flowers and the sap of plants, just woken from their winter sleep, had been giving out faint tinkling sounds. I soon left Livny, but those few days of spring remained in my memory for a long time. People talk of 'luminosity'. All my days in Livny were filled with this luminosity as if they had been sun-drenched.

One day Alexey came into the study where I was lying on the sofa and shook a number of photographs out of a cardboard box.

'Do you want,' he asked, 'to see places where you can never go?'

'Why?'

'Because with your colour eyes and hair it is dangerous to go anywhere below 45° latitude. I am a geologist and I know this for certain. Look, here you have obvious examples of rock formation, folds and precipices which exist nowhere else either in Europe or in Asia. Examine all this carefully and don't be afraid. If you like I shall explain to you a thing or two.'

He left, smiling mysteriously. I got up, sat down at the table and took the first large photograph I saw. The title underneath it was: 'The Ust-Urt Rise. View from the North-West, Mangyshlak.' I looked closely at the photograph and was struck dumb. In the extraordinary clarity of the atmosphere, straight out of the desert's clayey soil with small, dry stones scattered all over it, rose up a sheer black wall two to three hundred metres high, a smooth bar cut by a giant's knife. One had the impression that at that precise spot the desert had split and unknown forces had lifted half of it skywards by means of a vast screw-jack. The wall had no cracks and was not even pock-marked by rain – it was an absolutely unblemished wall, as if only just created, though many thousands of years had undoubtedly passed since it had first been formed.

So does a hurricane or storm cloud, sharply defined from the rest of the world, black as universal night, sombre, silent and all-enveloping, sometimes rise up above the earth in the clear sky. But within that dry cloud there were no flashes of lightning, no peels of thunder, no signs of distant hurricanes like suckers of dust connecting it to the earth.

Ust-Urt! I knew that on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea lay that inaccessible and dangerous plateau which looked like a gravestone, and had a perimeter of several hundred miles. No roads lead to it.

Notwithstanding Alexey's words I felt no fear. Rather I was gripped by an insatiable curiosity, an overwhelming desire to see those places with my own eyes and to experience not fear, but a kind of rapture difficult to comprehend, confronted by the grim loneliness of these sun-scorched rocks.

This, of course, is exactly the feeling a man would have at the sight of a cataclysm brought about by cosmic catastrophes, volcanic eruptions and great hurricanes which change in a moment the familiar face of the earth. It was a cataclysm set in a moment of time. The skeleton of a camel gleaming white at the edge of the wall with the precipice immediately below it, was just discernible through the magnifying glass. And not a blade of grass. Not even camel grass, that hardy desert plant, for which I looked in vain.

'This is hell itself!' I thought, 'horror and loneliness.'

The sight had something awe-inspiring, something thrilling about it, as if I was myself standing at the edge of the precipice. My recent conversation with Ilf in *Gudok*'s editorial office came to mind. We were speaking of travelling, and Ilf said casually:

'To obtain the maximum benefit from travelling you need great psychological endurance.'

'I love aphorisms!' remarked Olesha. 'Particularly when uttered by great travellers, Captain James Cook and Ilya Ilf.'

Ilf was not hurt.

'Yury,' he said with great conviction, 'you surely don't intend to spend all your life walking about in a panama hat in Sicilian orange groves or picking lilies in the stately royal gardens of Versailles. What if you happen to find yourself in such God-forsaken spots as, say, Antarctica or the deserts of China? Seventy degrees of bitter frost or a ghastly prickly dust, flung into your face by the wind for days on end. This sort of thing must be seen, endured, remembered. And no begging to be sent home to Mummy. Thus are great personalities and manly souls born. It is no use taking up a pen otherwise.'

I remembered these words spoken in jest by Ilf and said to myself that I would certainly go to the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and see that dead country – a country reduced to ashes by a world conflagration. And nothing would break my determination; and I would write about it. And afterwards all the

more intensely, all the more devotedly would I love every grey day in our Central Russia – the kind of day that was damp with rain and smelled of wet burdock plants.

It seemed to me that I would strengthen, fortify, develop to the very utmost my old love for ordinary earth only by experiencing the despair of these barren lands, unfit for human life. I examined all the remaining photographs. They were all very expressive; majestic even. They were snapshots of the shores of the Kara-Bugaz Bay on the Caspian.

I knew nothing about it; indeed I had no idea of its whereabouts. But its wildness and the kind of manifest mystery hidden in its mossy wastes drew me with an irresistable force. There *was* a mystery. I sensed that. Afterwards, Alexey gave me a very cursory and strange account of Kara-Bugaz. The story, as he told it, was a mixture of reality and fantasy. But, if anything, this only increased my interest for the unknown place. After he had spoken to me the fog of mystery thinned out in some places, but became thicker in others. I discovered that the bay was like a gigantic salt pan and that the area around it had never been explored.

Thus was born in a quiet provincial house, with balsamine growing shyly in the windows, the idea of a book taken entirely from real life, stern and even cruel. I began thinking a great deal about the book while getting ready for a journey to Mangyshlak and Kara-Bugaz.

And when three years later I finally made the journey and had started on the book, I visited Livny once again, though I do not know why. Perhaps because the country round Livny was the direct opposite of the Transcaspian desert. In Livny everyone was still there – old Mrs Shatsky and Nina and the geologist and Taya and even Kassian from Transonega.

He had stayed on in Livny on extended service, it seemed to me for Taya's sake, had matured, looked sun-tanned and no longer like a sickly little shepherd from the north.

I found it easier to write about Kara-Bugaz in the slumbering

old house, to the endless cries of the village roosters and the steady tinkle of rain water pouring from the roof into an old vat, while I myself looked out of the window at the sun, so cool and safe, only occasionally visible through the clouds.

14
Little Konotop

I had seen the little provincial town Konotop several times, but only out of a train window. I knew nothing about it except that Ehrenburg's[40] fictional character Julio Jurenito had died there.

It was said that 'in its time' the little town had been famous for its puddles. Every year Konotop's long-suffering horses would sink into them. The expression 'in its time' seemed mysterious. What did 'in its time' mean? Obviously the reference was to the time of its glory, although at no time could there conceivably have been any question of 'glory' for Konotop. The puddles have long since dried. In our own day Konotop was famous only for its marvellous meat patties. They were sold at the Konotop railway station buffet.

Just before a passenger train was due in, large trays of these steaming patties were taken out and placed on the counter. Every passenger considered it a point of honour to fight his way through to the bar and at the cost of burning his fingers, eat at least one juicy, scrunchy patty.

Konotop itself looked rather cosy with its clean little houses, poplars and wattle fences. Passengers were always delighted to see the poplars, those first symbols of the south.

For no known reason the little town gave its name to a Moscow writers' society. Almost every day a group of friends met in Frayerman's tiny flat: Arkady Gaidar;[41] Alexander Roskin[42] – a Chekhov specialist, writer and pianist; the young essayist Michael Loskutov;[43] the editor of a publishing house of children's books,

Vanya Khalturin; and myself. To these gatherings Roskin for some reason gave the name of 'Konotop'. He haughtily refused to explain the origin of the name, on the plea that in Pushkin's time there was a literary group 'Arzamas' and no one really knew why it had been given the name of a town as small and provincial as Konotop. We each had a theory on the subject. But perhaps the shrewdest of us all turned out to be Gaidar. (In general he was devilishly shrewd and cunning.)

At one time, Frayerman's wife, Valentina, used to treat us to meat patties, and since Konotop was famous for them and Roskin knew it, Gaidar maintained he had coined this strange name for our group.

We met nearly every day, read to one another all we had just written, argued, made a lot of noise, told stories, drank vodka and cheap Georgian wine and consumed at a sitting three huge tins of pork and beans.

We appeared gay and carefree, for the obvious reason that literary plans not only filled us to the brim, but were being gradually put into effect. There and then, 'under our very noses'. Gaidar wrote his wonderful 'Blue Cap', Frayerman his equally wonderful 'The Wild Dog Dingo or The Story of a First Love'. Roskin exercised his scrupulous talent writing a book on Chekhov. Loskutov, in a style almost embarrassed by his own powers of observation, wrote about Central Asia.

I have elsewhere written a lot about Gaidar and Frayerman and do not want to repeat myself. But I must say a few words about the other members of 'Konotop', particularly Roskin. He was a complex man, remarkable for the wide range of his knowledge and his sharp, mocking mind. He was a first-rate pianist and had a condescending contempt for us because we did not have refined musical tastes. Whenever he was depressed he played passages from *Khovanshchina* – mainly the fortune-telling scene – and sang the heart-breaking words about 'the great harvesting-time of grief' and 'imprisonment in a far-off country'.

He was abrupt and affectionate, but, like most lonely people,

he was also reserved and reticent. Among us he was considered to be the most 'grown-up', the most serious and exacting in his attitude to everything we wrote. To us he gave no quarter. His articles on writers were markedly different from the raw critical scribblings of the time and immediately made him one of the best researchers into Soviet literature, one of its experts. He was the first to write short monographs of one to two pages on Western writers. They have, unfortunately, been forgotten.

I remember his essay on Flaubert, in which the writer, the man and his time were described in about one page and came to life before the reader in a series of faultless, concise tableaux. Thus, for example, instead of giving the usual detailed account of Flaubert's exhausting drudgery over his manuscripts, Roskin told a single anecdote.

'It is common knowledge that Flaubert used to work in his little house in Croisset on the banks of the Seine. He would sit at the table till daybreak. A lamp with a green shade stood on his table. Right through the night a light shone in the one window of Flaubert's study. The light in the window was so constant that skippers of boats going up the Seine from Le Havre to Rouen relied on it as on a kind of lighthouse. Sailors had a rule: "Hold course on the lighted window of Monsieur Flaubert's house." It is said that the rule was entered in the sailing directions of the Lower Seine and only cancelled after the writer's death.'

In the winter of 1962 I was in France and thought of making the trip from Paris to Croisset to visit that refuge immortalized in Flaubert's letters, that little house on the river bank where Flaubert received his guests: Turgenev, George Sand, the Goncourt brothers, Maupassant – the finest writers of the time. But on the day appointed for the trip to Croisset, we were told on the news from Rouen that a heavy 'smog' had come over from England across the Channel – an impenetrable and lethal fog. All traffic on Normandy's roads was halted and the trip had to be postponed.

The French critic Picon, responsible for the trip, was extremely

sorry. He tried to comfort me by giving me the rather sad information that although Flaubert's house, destroyed by the bombs during the war, had been restored, it was no longer what it used to be at the time of its former owner. Of the garden practically nothing had remained, and besides, Rouen, as it spread, had squeezed in Flaubert's property with factories and new buildings and had deprived it of its country charm.

To tell this story about Flaubert, Roskin needed one paragraph, where I would have been obliged to write a whole page. This, obviously, was the reason why we used to refer to Roskin's articles as being made of steel – for their brevity, their finish and their cold glitter. Roskin left behind him a small but valuable literary heritage.

He wrote a book about our remarkable botanist Vavilov: *Caravans, Roads and Ears of Wheat.* Vavilov set himself the task of 'mobilizing the vegetable capital of the entire world' and concentrating in the USSR the whole stock of high-quality seeds, created by nature and man in the course of thousands of years. This gigantic task Vavilov was able to accomplish thanks to his unbridled energy and his great knowledge.

At that time Paul de Kruif's[44] interesting if somewhat sensational works on discoverer-scientists were very popular with our public. Roskin's book on Vavilov was more serious as well as more lively than de Kruif's works. It lacked that touch of familiarity which de Kruif employed when speaking about the greatest scientist of his age. That book of Roskin's is now completely forgotten. He wrote it for the young. It ought, of course, to be republished. It was written with perfect knowledge of the subject, since Roskin was able to make a study of biology and botany when he was helping his brother, the biologist G. J. Roskin, who became widely known by his researches into the treatment of cancer.

After his book on Vavilov, Roskin wrote an excellent biography of Chekhov, and many articles on literature, mainly on early Soviet prose.

He helped me by warning me, in spite of our friendship, against the dangers of a literary exoticism and an 'operatic' artificiality of style. He published this warning in one of his articles. Fortunately, the article coincided with my own thorough dissatisfaction with my early stories and forced me to abandon literary embellishment and try to achieve clarity and simplicity. Soon afterwards, Roskin welcomed – and in the same friendly way – the appearance in print of *Kara-Bugaz* and *The Meshchery Country*.

I frequently stayed with Roskin in the Meshchery forests as well as in Yalta and got to know him well.

His presence lent each day its own quite special 'Roskin' aspect. He was an enthusiast, in spite of his seeming composure – his English composure. An enthusiast in everything – in literary arguments, music, fishing (this occupation he did not, for some reason, despise, though his attitude to it was sceptical), games of poker and his other interests.

Like most enthusiasts he loved laying bets and on that score competed with the resourceful and cunning Gaidar. Whenever he won a bet he was as pleased as a child.

He had a taste for extraordinary estimates. For instance, he would estimate how many pages he could write in a day without becoming in the slightest tired, and decided on no more than two. Roskin multiplied this by the number of days in the year: three hundred and sixty-five; result: about seven hundred pages. The optimum size for a book he considered to be two hundred and fifty pages. Thus every year he would be able to publish three large books, three full-scale novels if he worked like Dumas or Balzac. We used to say that the only trouble lay in his being neither Dumas nor Balzac, but Roskin would contemptuously ignore these remarks. To justify his estimates he was fond of telling us the story of a French writer (I do not remember the name) who, besides his 'big' work, secretly wrote every morning some five minutes' worth of prose (which gives ten printed lines). In this way by the end of the year he would finish a story eighty

pages long – quite a lot for a story – and give it to his wife as a birthday present.

'A rare case of married bliss!' Roskin would exclaim.

We agreed, but did not want to follow the French writer's example. Roskin did not mind, though he did call us loafers and amateurs.

Roskin would fish with us in a village called Solotcha in Meshchery province, but only for 'points'. A complicated system of points was arrived at after many a long argument. The fish was classified according to size and kind. The highest point was given for a bream, the lowest for a ruff.

After the fishing was over, a noisy argument would usually start on the bank about the number of points each of us had won. As a rule it was Frayerman who won. He, for some reason, had great luck with bream, while Gaidar and I generally caught perch and roach. For a perch Roskin never wanted to concede more than four points on the plea that that greedy and stupid fish got itself on the hook automatically and catching it was no great art, while a bream was very wary and circumspect and in order to catch it you must not move, cough, smoke or blow your nose. Frayerman would therefore get twelve points for a bream, which was quite unfair.

Our arguments on the river bank would continue till dusk, till the first glitter of the distant stars or till the moon hung low in the evening sky. The moon brought with it slow waves of river damp and the silence, always a little mysterious, of the world at night.

All these bets, 'points' and estimates were breathing spaces, the easy and care-free side of life. The rest of the time Roskin worked hard and unstintingly. For each work he made an enormous number of extracts, a whole library of quotations from books, articles, newspapers, private letters, notes of conversations in the streets, in trams, in editorial offices. In the course of his work he littered the whole table with books and extracts written in his tiny, neat, somewhat Chekhovian, hand. He

rummaged among them, found those he needed and inserted them into his text in such bold and novel ways that the appearance of some quite familiar quotation put one in mind of a sudden explosion revealing vast strata of untouched literary rock. It was as if the revived lustre of a dead star had illuminated some faded, long-forgotten pages. In Roskin's hands quotations became his own creations. I was convinced that with such a sharp 'sense of quotation' it would be possible to combine them into a remarkable book, making up a single whole in spite of differences in the style of the authors quoted and of the dissimilarity of the epochs in which they had first appeared.

Roskin could not work in isolation, like many of us. He never hid his pieces till they were 'ripe' for showing. Reserved, indeed reticent in everything that concerned his private life, he never concealed anything to do with his work. He was keen not only to know what others were writing and how, but to let others know about his work and its actual progress. He was cruel in his expressions of opinion, but he demanded the same cruelty to be applied to him.

One quiet and crisp winter in Yalta, a few Muscovites came to stay in the Writers' House. Among them was Roskin.

We worked in our own rooms, met only in the dining-room, and knew what the others were working on in no more than vague and reluctantly voiced terms. This mole-like existence was not to Roskin's taste. He suggested we should meet, *à la* 'Konotop', every evening and read to each other what we had written in the course of that one day – but no more, on any account. And we should have a short discussion on each piece. We all started shouting. How could you possibly discuss a few paragraphs totally out of context. Absurd! Most annoyed of all was George Chulkov,[45] 'the last symbolist on earth' – a tiny, neat old man who looked like Liszt. He considered Roskin's suggestion to be a profanation of art.

'Let's try it all the same,' said Roskin, 'and you'll see we'll have

enough to talk about. Particularly if you take into consideration the fact that there are unsurpassed chatterboxes among us.'

On that score there was general agreement. These evening sessions Roskin called 'Amerikankas' – Americans – in the same vein as his reference to the gatherings in Frayerman's flat as 'Konotop'. Moscow at the time had a proliferation of small beer-drinking establishments where the customers drank their mug of beer standing up and then left. There were no seating arrangements. They were called 'Amerikankas' in those days. Now they are called 'run-ups' or 'shalmans'. Our readings were a kind of literary 'Amerikanka'. Each read out an excerpt from his own work – drank as it were, a mug of beer. This 'Amerikanka' tradition survived in Yalta for several years. The first one was noisy and interesting. Roskin read an excerpt out of his essay on Alfonse Daudet. Thereafter every evening someone read something of his own.

Arbuzov[46] read passages out of the play *Tanya* on which he was working in Yalta, Atarov[47] passages from his story 'The Monkey-puzzle Tree'. I myself passages from the short story 'The Constellation of the Bloodhounds'. Hecht, Pismenny,[48] Lavrenev,[49] Malyshkin,[50] Gaidar and Derman[51] were also among the readers – everyone, in fact, who then lived in Yalta. We would light the fire in the hearth. The wind hummed outside as it blew through the cypress trees. Our arguments assumed white-hot intensity. Finally, even old Chulkov capitulated. He came to take part in one 'Amerikanka' and read an act out of his new play. It was exceedingly symbolist, and therefore in our view, quite old fashioned and mannered. And so in spite of our respect for Chulkov's rich past and for his age, the play was torn to shreds. Arbuzov was particularly angry. But old Chulkov argued with us with such fierce vigour, defended himself from attack with so much skill and elegance, flung at us such bucketsful of knowledge taken from every area of literature and psychology that we finally acknowledged defeat (all of us except Arbuzov) and even accepted Chulkov as honorary member of our 'Amerikanka'.

Chulkov, of course, was a most extraordinary old man. A symbolist, constantly and noisily quarrelling with the symbolists, particularly with his former friend Alexander Blok, a former political deportee, a specialist on Tyutchev,[52] a mystic, a connoisseur of Italy, a lover of desperate winter journeys to Ai-Petri (against doctor's orders), a first-rate scholar in all questions of poetry and philosophy, a fibber, a creator of theories of poetry, a charming crank – he brought into our life a constant intellectual unrest, and an eighteenth-century courtesy of manner.

He woke me up one night and told me with genuine horror that his neighbour, a sullen individual totally unknown to anyone, was obviously a succubus or incubus (Chulkov was a great expert in that mystical hierarchy), he did not let Chulkov sleep a minute at night as he crawled along walls like a fly ('he obviously has some kind of suckers on his fingers,' said Chulkov indignantly), would reach the ceiling, lose his grip and fall down with a thud like a rag doll. He would then climb up the wall again, again fall – and so on all night till dawn.

'I've just been out in the park and had a look,' said Chulkov in a whisper. 'His window is lit up and you can see it all. It's very frightening.'

We both went out into the park, but were too late – the incubus had put out the light and I saw nothing after all. The wind raised Chulkov's long grey hair and I felt ill at ease. In the morning Chulkov, shaved, fresh, elegant, went to see the manager of the house, Jacob Khokhlov, a former Black Sea fleet boatswain, well known among writers, and asked to be transferred to another room as far from the incubus as possible.

'If that incubus, or whatever he is, worries you I'll transfer you, by all means,' said Khokhlov with perfect composure. 'All I want is peace and quiet for the writers.'

His character and way of life marked out Roskin as a typical city-dweller ('urbanist', as we called him for fun). He was fond of music, theatres, work in the reading rooms of big libraries, the

cinema, books, the bright lights and the noise of city streets, but was a little prejudiced against the country. In his opinion nature caused a great deal of trouble. He hated having to put up with any kind of inconvenience and occasional discomfort from rain, cold, wind, dirt, mosquitoes and dark autumn evenings in Solotcha, evenings when reading and writing were possible only by the light of a kitchen oil lamp.

Frayerman, Gaidar and myself used to stay in Solotcha till very late autumn. Roskin thought us mad. The very first damp and cold autumn day when the woods and gardens began rapidly to lose their greenery, he would leave for Moscow.

But gradually and stealthily nature laid siege to him and finally captured him. He acknowledged defeat and in the hurly-burly of Moscow life would with increasing frequency talk of an evening in the woods or a quiet day on the river. One late afternoon he and I were sitting on the deserted bank of the river Oka near the ferryman's cottage. Behind us, lush and green, were the steep hills of the right bank. It was that ancient bank so intimately bound up with Russia's history, with decaying fortress-monasteries – strongholds against Tartar raids – old willows and apple orchards, villages bearing extraordinary names like Agrafena's Retreat or St John Chrysostome, the distant lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the crowing of cocks, the smell of lime-trees in full bloom and the singing of women returning from hay making. Close to us on the left bank we were faced by the dark wall of the Meshchery forest. The evening mist was billowing up as it rose over the fields and water meadows and the rivers.

An ordinary village rooster came up to have a close look at us. He glittered all black, gold and scarlet, but in spite of his rich apparel looked a complete fool. He stood on one leg, stared at us and then suddenly let out a deafening, angry screech right into our faces. I threw a piece of wood at him. He screamed, lost immediately all his haughty airs and ran away stumbling and bobbing up and down. I laughed, and Roskin said reprovingly:

'Why did you do that? He has a perfect right to be proud of himself. An extraordinarily beautiful bird. I've noticed it for the first time. In fact, I have lately been noticing something new every day – these rafts for instance, and the way the wind makes willow trees constantly change the colour of their leaves. I could sit on this log all day long.'

After that he gradually stopped feeling a stranger to nature and more often accompanied us on our long and tiring but fascinating expeditions which Gaidar used to call 'the sorties of the fishing patrol'.

Roskin perished in the People's War in the autumn of 1941 near Vyazma. Always cool and composed, he would be overwhelmed with cold indignation whenever he spoke about fascism.

His hatred for fascism, for the lunatic dictator Hitler, for the totalitarian régime was such as to make him experience a disgust similar to that in the presence of some repulsive vermin which must be crushed out of existence.

Before he died, life gave him – lonely and reserved as he was – its last smile: the love of a wonderful and devoted woman. As he went off to join his unit and said goodbye to her, he did not look back. It was beyond his strength.

There are ordeals which no man should ever be made to suffer. They are too pitiless and they conflict with what is sublime and dear to man, that which for years had been the very stuff of Roskin's life and to which he had always persisted in calling his fellow-men. He had called them to it by his thoughts, his books, the whole nature of his inner world. He went, and the woman, blind to all else around her, stared in blank despair at his slightly bowed back.

And for some reason I remembered my mother when my father left her after she had condemned him for his thoughtlessness and had cursed her own broken life and her children's sad future – remembered how she burst into tears when she looked at my father's bowed back, as he went off to leave her for ever.

His back looked so helpless that Mother could not but burst into tears. A moment more and she would have called him, would have run after him, and he would certainly have come back. But pride, resentment, intolerance did not let her do it. Perhaps the sight of a man's receding back, as he is going away for ever, is the most terrible of all the things one may recall in life.

I heard that on joining the army Roskin took some poison (morphia) with him. He did not fear death; he treated it with a kind of cheerful indifference. The only thing he said he could not have borne was to get into the fascists' hands and let them insult him. Near Vyazma, Roskin's unit was surrounded. The Germans interrogated the prisoners and screened out the Jews. The interpreter, himself a member of the unit, told them Roskin was an Armenian. He was saved, or so it seemed. But some scoundrel gave Roskin away and the guards thrust him aside to join the Jews. Then Roskin took poison. They say he did not suffer long.

15
'You will Not Get Away with that!'

Year by year the number of Frayerman's friends grew. As a result 'Konotop' began to swell like dough, and increase, as Roskin used to say, by natural gemmation. We had finally to set up three categories of 'Konotops' – Lesser, Medium and Major.

The 'Lesser Konotop', limited to its original membership, met almost every evening. The membership of the 'Medium Konotop' included Vasily Grossman,[53] Semyon Hecht, Andrey Platonov, our old friend of Batum days Misha Sinyavsky and his wife Lucienna. The 'Medium Konotop' met once a week together with the Lesser. And finally, the 'Major Konotop' – unwieldy and noisy – met once a month.

The 'Major Konotop' included a very mixed lot, from the enthusiastic Siberian poet Vanya Eroshin (*My Soul is Aflame!*) to the French-type Academician and historian Tarlé[54] wearing, so to speak, his laurel wreath, and from author George Storm always neat and tidy with not so much as a bit of fluff allowed to settle on his jacket, down to the Volga bibliophile Shura Alimov, an eternal student in a Russian shirt.

Gaidar composed humorous verses about every member of the various 'Konotops', but unfortunately no one wrote them down and now they are forgotten. He composed the 'Konotop' anthem. The anthem described in touching terms Gaidar's death in Konotop from causes unknown.

Gaidar wrote his verses swiftly, with a sly turn of phrase, and sometimes mercilessly. One evening, I read in the 'Lesser Konotop' a short story about the book I intended to write – the book about Kara-Bugaz.

It was not, strictly speaking, a short story, but a loose plan of the book, embellished with author's digressions and quotations out of geographical manuals and books on chemistry, extracts from Eastern poets, from sailing directions for Caspian Sea pilots and from the encyclopaedia, as well as my own thoughts disguised as quotations from other writers. I liked the fact that not a single literary expert or scholar could convict me of getting these quotations wrong, since quotations and their authors were in each case imaginary. When I had finished reading I opened the meeting to general discussion. But there was, in fact, very little discussion since no one knew what Kara-Bugaz was. Only Roskin said that he would gladly have written a book on Kara-Bugaz with me, but it was useless since he was sure that I would never go to Kara-Bugaz and would not write a book about it.

Of course Roskin proposed a bet. Should I fail to write a book in a year's time I would have to buy Roskin a school microscope; if I did write a book Roskin would buy me a good spoon-bait. The concept of what constituted a good spoon-bait was very elastic, varying in value between five roubles and a thousand. The price of the spoon-bait gave rise to constant arguments.

I wanted to write a book as purely geographical in character, as dry and uncompromising as a travel report, and no more attractive than a rough-and-ready map sketched out with a lump of coal on a piece of packing paper.

Ever since childhood, I felt annoyed that the earth had all been explored and described, and this feeling was particularly intense that year. Probably because I had to sit in Moscow and stew in the sticky tedium of the ROSTA News Agency. The tedium had acquired a colour of its own for me: I saw it as dirty-yellow. It was particularly annoying that so often the world had been explored and described by people quite incapable of putting

into words its complex mystery and beauty. Everything had been described! Everything! Everything had been studied! Why had some cartographer Captain Butakov not left me an Aral Sea or something equally small, for me to sail over and make a thorough study of? I would have done it with the greatest of pleasure.

I would have recalled down to the smallest detail all the facts which in any way concerned that sea. I would even have recalled the project of the French writer, Bernardin de St Pierre, for setting up a republic on the shores of the Aral Sea for political exiles from all countries of the world. But that staid blonde German, Catherine II, rejected the project for no reason whatsoever.

Everything in this world had been described, except such rare and hellish places as Kara-Bugaz. This is why it had a quite special and disturbing appeal for me. I am not superstitious in the very slightest and yet I could not forget the warning of Alexey Shatsky, the geologist, that Kara-Bugaz might cause my death. I liked that warning, too. I firmly made up my mind to go to Kara-Bugaz in the spring. I had, of course, no money and no hope of getting any either. The only way of acquiring money consisted in offering some publishing house a book, as yet unwritten, about Kara-Bugaz and getting an advance payment on it. I went to see the director of one publishing house. He contemplated me with an irritated expression on his face, as if he had heard it all before and was bored to death by it.

I gave him a short account of Kara-Bugaz. 'Vast deposits – unique in the world – of mirabilite or Glauber's salt,' I said, 'accumulate uninterruptedly on the shores of the Bay of Kara-Bugaz.'

The director impatiently twirled a newly sharpened pencil, struck the table with its pointed end and broke it.

'Disgraceful!' he said. 'Both are disgraceful! The pencil is worthless and so is your plan for writing a novel about laxative salts and getting a tidy little sum in advance against these salts. In view of the Soviet Union's fantastic industrial growth at the present time your subject, if properly examined, turns out to be

nothing less than an attempt to mock and ridicule the people and the Soviet government. You will not do it!' he said firmly and distinctly, as if speaking to a crook who had tried to fob him off with rotten goods, 'you will not do it! You will not get away with *that*!'

He again struck the table with his pencil and this time broke it completely. 'You will not do it!' he shouted, looking not at me, but somewhere beyond and behind my back with round, motionless eyes. I got up and left without saying goodbye.

Here I shall interrupt my story for a moment, to tell how, for the one and only time in my life, I saw and heard Stalin.

It happened in about the mid-thirties. There was a Congress of the Communist Youth League in the Kremlin. I was pleased when Detgiz[55] offered me a guest ticket for the last meeting of the Congress. At that time the doors of the Kremlin were sealed to ordinary people.

After a twenty years' interval I was once again able to see the Kremlin, to walk over the huge flag-stones of its squares, to have a look at the cathedrals with their ancient, blackened gold, and their sullen, apprehensive silence. I entered the Kremlin through the Saviour's Gate. The sentry, occasionally casting penetrating and suspicious glances at me, checked my documents. I crossed the square to the Main Palace past several sentry boxes. Every time I approached one, a bell in it would ring insistently and a sentry would come out and salute with an air of condescension, his face absolutely still as if turned to stone. Stalin had not yet made an appearance at the Congress. The members of it hoped he would, if only at the last session. But no one could say whether this would happen or not. Even Kosariov, the Congress Chairman, did not know.

The members of the Congress shouted either singly or in unison:'We want comrade Stalin, Stalin, Stalin!' Occasionally the cry 'We want Comrade Stalin!' would give place to the exclamation 'Glory to Stalin, the genius, the father of us all!'

The exclamation would be drowned in the roar of applause and the stamping of feet. It was getting late. The whole Presidium was waiting, standing, for Stalin's appearance. And then it happened! Stalin emerged – suddenly and silently out of the wall behind the presidium-table, right out of one of its walnut panels.

I was not aware of the actual moment – and no one else had evidently noticed it either – when he came out or, rather, detached himself from the wall. Everyone jumped up. There was frenzied applause. Here and there individual shouts rang out at frequent intervals. Unhurriedly Stalin came up to the table, stopped and with hands linked on his stomach gazed at the hall.

I was sitting quite near and had a good look at him. The first thing that struck me was that he did not much resemble the thousands of portraits and official photographs, which set out to flatter him. The man who stood before me was stumpy and stocky, with a heavy face, reddish hair, low forehead and a thick moustache. He wore the uniform which he had evidently invented for his own use before he took to wearing his Generalissimo's uniform – grey tunic and grey breeches always tucked into shiny, well polished boots.

The hall rocked with all the shouting. People applauded, holding their hands high over their heads. At any moment, one felt, the ceiling would come crashing down. Stalin raised a hand. Immediately there was a deathly hush. And in that hush, Stalin shouted abruptly and in a somewhat hoarse voice, with a strong Georgian accent:

'Long live the Soviet youth!' and vanished into the wall as mysteriously and suddenly as he had appeared.

16
An Ancient Map

In the course of my stay in Livny the geologist Alexey Shatsky showed me an old map of the eastern coastline of the Caspian Sea. I copied it and even made a few very discreet additions to it. I added, or rather marked on it, the imaginary spots where it would be a good idea to make a halt in the course of my equally imaginary future wanderings along the shores of Kara-Bugaz. These spots always differed in some way from the general aspect of the desert and its calcareous uplands. I chose them near dried-up wells and old tombs with monuments which had lost all semblance of anything but a heap of stones.

Somewhere on the southern outskirts of Mangyshlak, I found a spot marked: 'Several withered trees.' I noted it down for one of my halts. Probably they were old mulberries or prickly saksaul trees – trees capable of causing bruises as if they were pieces of broken iron. These marks or notes were, of course, nothing but a game. Therefore I kept my map hidden from other people's eyes. I felt too shy to tell anyone about it even such a very understanding person, with a childish streak in him, as Frayerman.

I marked on my map not only halts, but also spots where, once there, I had to think of someone near to me or of some event in my life. Here, I would say to myself, it would be good to recall that night in Lyublin, all strewn with lilac, and here the way we used, when we were boys, to wander about the woods in Revny, looking for clear, murmuring streams in overgrown hollows.

Both lilac and streams absolutely had to be recalled in the midst of the scorching Transcaspian desert.

The justification for this childish game came later when I got to the shores of Kara-Bugaz and saw that I had been quite right to immerse myself in such a strange game with maps. My fondness for maps brought me a great deal of knowledge, as well as occasional pleasant surprises.

In my life several fairly interesting stories have been connected with maps. I shall tell one of them. It concerns a map of the Atlantic Ocean, twins, my absent-mindedness and a small town in Provence. It began in 1956 when I first found myself in Paris and had, in the second-hand book-stalls on the banks of the Seine, an experience which brought with it a very sharp disappointment.

Almost every bouquiniste sported tempting maps, slightly tinted and faded with age. A light breeze blew along the Seine, making the maps flutter and giving them the appearance of those flags which had gone stiff, were no longer used and were hung out to dry along the marble quays. I looked at the maps for a long time, but could not buy a single one. My meagre supply of francs had by that time been exhausted. A few paltry and weightless centimes jingled weakly in my pocket. They were so light that they gave the impression of being made of Swiss cheese. Of banknotes with large denominations, smart and crisp, made of thin paper, with the romantic portrait of the young Bonaparte on the bridge of Arcole, nothing remained but a pleasant memory. And the same applied to the bearded and impressive Victor Hugo on the 5-franc notes. Well, anyway, I was unable to buy a single map and gave vent to my annoyance about it in a short story, 'Ephemeral Paris', published shortly afterwards in Moscow. It was the starting point for the unfolding of the events which followed.

A French student – a certain Imard, a native of Montauban in the South of France – was at that time a member of the Slavonic Faculty of the Sorbonne University in Paris. Imard was studying Russian. He met a Russian girl from Moscow, sent to the Sor-

bonne to perfect her knowledge of French, and soon they got married.

After finishing at the Sorbonne, Imard left for Montauban with his young wife, to become a schoolmaster. Quite by chance, he read my 'Ephemeral Paris' in an issue of the magazine *Oktyabr*, was overwhelmed with pity for my unfortunate experience, bought an old map on a quay of the Seine in Paris and sent it to me in Tarusa as a present. The map was enclosed in a thick carton tube, on which a great number of French stamps had been stuck. Such an abundance of foreign stamps caused considerable excitement among the unpampered philatelists of Tarusa. In the letter which accompanied the parcel Imard informed me that he had recently left Montauban and was living in a small town somewhere between Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence.

In December 1962 I went to France again and wrote to Imard from Paris. He sent me in reply an urgent invitation to visit him in his Provence town and do it as quickly as possible, because he had just had twin daughters and he would love to have me at the celebration of that family event.

In the letter was enclosed an invitation card, printed in large, attractive type, apparently in Marseilles. The Imard family was inviting all relations, friends and acquaintances to their house on the day appointed for celebrating the appearance in this world of two new Imards at once. I had quite a clear mental picture of that day, full of gaiety, under the cloudless sky of Provence:

A crowd of curious, but polite school-children – Imard's pupils – would be gathered round his house; the tricolore would be fluttering in the breeze over the gate. Down the quiet street would stretch a line of dusty cars of different makes, all belonging to the guests – sun-tanned and noisy denizens of Provence, connoisseurs of the famous Marseilles dish known as *bouillabaisse* (it contains everything the Mediterranean Sea has which is edible – shrimps, lobsters big and small, mussels, varieties of fish and seaweed). The women would be talking to each other gently. The young mother with her grey Russian eyes would be the fond

centre of general attention, the young father – schoolmaster and sportsman – would look embarrassed and the town mayor – a scraggy old man in an old-fashioned broad-brimmed hat such as was worn by the famous Provençal poet Mistral and the no less famous Provençal prose-writer Alphonse Daudet – would be making jokes about Franco-Russian friendship taking such an unexpected and tangible form in their little town.

Tables would be laid. Meat would be roasted, as is their wont in France, on spits turning over the fire burning in the hearth. Wines, properly matured, would be uncorked. And a young neighbour of mine at table, a sentimental and talkative man – somehow a little drunk by then – would keep assuring me that since his tenderest years he had been in love with foggy, frosty Russia and even on sunny days (of which he was thoroughly sick) he yearned for clouds in the sky. Peals of laughter would make no impression on him. Yes, *messieurs-dames*, he was yearning for the wonderful clouds of Russia. He had seen exactly the same kind of clouds during his recent stay on the shores of the English Channel. In actual fact, it was at another place – in the village of Egalières – that I met the young Frenchman with a yearning for clouds, but it does not matter. Anyway, taking it all in all, it was difficult to imagine all the possible events which might take place at that delightful gathering. I was afraid of being late for it.

We left Paris to visit Provence, with the firm intention of looking up our pen-pal Imard on the way back. Hence our tour of Provence provided, to a certain extent, a foretaste of that visit. It is no doubt worth saying a few words about the tour, if only because it avoided the traditional and all-too-well known beauty spots. We started with Avignon, the mediaeval Avignon of the Popes. Fortress walls, mighty yet light, encompassed the city. The Papal palace, as if growing out of the rock, towered above them. The swift-flowing Rhône rolled past a café with the pleasant name of 'Tout va bien'. The owner's tame canaries would light on the hands of the slightly tipsy lorry-drivers. The lorry-drivers

gently stroked the birds' tight, scratchy little gold wings with their soiled fingers and lovingly breathed wine fumes at them.

The sun-drenched landscape spread out beyond Avignon, and on the hill beyond the river rose up the deserted Fort-St-André – a monument of fortified power and calm. No more than two knights could ride abreast through its mighty gates, and between the stones of the walls grew tiny, thread-thin shoots of wild irises, shrivelled with the cold (the time was December, but happily that local scourge, the *mistral*, was not blowing).

We carefully pulled out several such shoots, brought them to Moscow in damp paper, and planted them in large vases containing our Russian soil; within a fortnight the shoots turned into clumps of huge, sword-shaped emerald leaves. In the spring they would be planted out in Tarusa and they would live side by side in perfect unity with Russian daisies and mint.

The streets of Avignon consist entirely of mediaeval houses with black railings on balconies and bronze door knockers. Many houses had memorial tablets fixed on them, so green with age that it was difficult to read the writing on them. However, our companion, Victor Nekrasov, was able to decipher on one such tablet the to us unexpected information that Montgolfier, the first airman and inventor of the balloon, had lived and died in that house. The house, by the way, was poor, narrow and dark.

Then there was Arles. Life contains phenomena more fit for dreams than reality. Such a dream town was Arles. The light of day – sharp and clear – produced a particular, stereoscopic effect, emphasizing the features of that town with its Roman amphitheatre where bullfights take place nowadays; its bare, deserted streets, so suggestive of near-by Spain, the little lonely house of Van Gogh which has somehow survived on the edge of a vacant lot, itself the result of an air raid which destroyed that part of the town.

The Impressionists' gallery in the Louvre contains the works of all the great painters of France, including Van Gogh's. His seem

to consist of chunks of rich Arles soil, luminous with ochre, minium, red wine, the autumn colour of vine leaves, century-old rust and the damp, mauve weight of freshly ploughed earth. Trees, tied into bronze knots by the hands of unknown giants, have the light playing on their lilac-grey bark. All is thick and dense, the colours seem to veer away from each other, unable to bear each other's glitter.

In our Arles hotel, the walls covered with crimson brocade, sleepy and so old that a man of the present age somehow felt ill at ease, the ambitious owners had screwed copper plates to the doors of some of the rooms, with inscriptions such as: 'The Mistral Room', 'The Picasso Room', 'The Emperor Napoleon III Room'. It was obvious that if a man of any kind of fame, however tenuous, ever happened to spend a night in the hotel, the old Arles engraver would grumble and start engraving a new plate for the hotel doors.

We were allotted the Mistral Room. As I examined the room's furniture I suddenly thought (for no reason I can explain) that Mistral must have been a very respectable old-fashioned and garrulous poet. He must have had an easy life. He was required to do no more than sing the universally acknowledged beauties of Provence. For some reason in the Mistral Room I felt ill at ease, as if I had been upsetting the famous poet's well-ordered way of life, an old man's way of life: upsetting it because Mistral would not understand what it was I wanted, why I got into his room at all, who I was and, indeed, what he should be talking to me about. This feeling tormented me all night long through a fitful sleep, probably because the wind blowing from the none too distant Alps was the poet's namesake, the real rude and wild *mistral*. And it is, of course, a well-known fact that it confuses men's thoughts, irritates people and makes them commit acts inconsistent with each other. That is obviously the reason why men who have committed crimes during a *mistral* receive attenuated punishments by the local courts.

Long before I went to France I had heard or read somewhere

about the beauty of the *Arlésiennes*. But, inevitably, one pays no attention to passing remarks until faced by the actual fact. This is exactly what happened in this case. We went into a cosy little café next to the wall of the Roman Arena (this is how in Arles they refer to the Roman amphitheatre, a sort of Arles Colosseum, still extant). There was not a soul in the café. Portraits of famous toreros in multi-coloured traditional dress were hanging on the walls. A cricket was chirping softly in the warmth and quiet of the place. Its chirping made it cosier still, particularly since a late December afternoon, cold and clear, was sending its sparkle through the windows and the sun shone on the café without giving any warmth. Warmth was provided by the gas stove.

Only a minute after our arrival, the owner of the café – a young *Arlésienne* – came out of the back room. What a pity that the behaviour, so romantically bold, natural to men like Heine, has long since left us, has long ceased to be natural to our epoch. Heine, of course, would have risen to his feet in front of the *Arlésienne*, as if she were a Spanish infanta or George Sand, and would have said, with a low bow, something to the effect that his heart found the rustle of her dress more beautiful and more disturbing than the rustle of the most precious royal silks.

He would, of course, have said it with wit and grace – we have long forgotten how to speak thus. He would have said it and would have called forth a sudden blush on the cheeks of the charming *Arlésienne*.

A moment ago she was not there. Now she had come in, she existed, and it had become clear that the world could not, of course, exist without her, that she had been living in it for a long, long time, mistress of your humble and obedient heart.

She was not even very young. Probably about thirty. Her narrow face was lightly bronzed, as can only be in Arles. Her eyes, dark yet clear, a little gloomy and stern, were of the kind that look straight into your own, eyes whose gloom brightens suddenly right down to their golden depths with the radiance and the thrill of a mysterious smile. And this girl's smile merged with

the lightness of her voice: a voice which rang out dearly as in a dream.

Ever since my schooldays I have felt the beauty of the Russian language, its strength and compactness. With the passing of the years this has become transmuted into a deep love for the language and into a fairly clear knowledge of it (to know it all is obviously beyond any single individual). I soon discovered that to know a language is not enough, particularly for men who have dedicated themselves to literature. Apart from knowledge, you also need a feeling for your own language. Often enough the feeling is inborn, organic. It prevents us from violating the euphoric qualities of the language and its very distinct yet inexplicable rhythm.

But in spite of my love of the Russian language I have sometimes thought that it is not as melodious and as clear as some others, particularly French and Italian, Hebrew and even Dutch. Obviously, like all of us, I am too familiar with my own language to be able to hear it from outside, as it were, and fully appreciate it.

One evening a waiter in an empty Arles café – a middle-aged *garçon* and typically *Arlésien* with mocking eyes – once again made us aware of the beauty of our language. For a long time he stood in a respectful attitude a short distance away from our table listening to our conversation. Finally he came up to us and asked us what language we were speaking.

'Why do you ask?' we inquired.

'It's quite an exceptionally beautiful language,' he replied. 'I've never heard one like it. Is it Hungarian?'

'No.'

'Polish?'

'No.'

'Czech?'

'No.'

'What is it then?'

'It's Russian.'

'Wait a bit!' cried the waiter and went into the back room. Out of it he brought another waiter – grey-haired and benevolent.

'There!' he said and with an air of triumph showed us his colleague, who looked embarrassed and then suddenly and almost without an accent quoted a Russian nonsense rhyme about a priest and his dog. We were speechless with astonishment.

'How do you know it?'

'I'm learning Russian,' replied the grey-haired waiter. 'I have an old grammar. I've learned Spanish using the same sort of grammar. But I lack practice in Russian. It's fantastically difficult. Russians never come to Arles. You are the first for years.'

'Why then are you studying that language?'

'I like it,' replied the waiter, looking embarrassed. 'I am a bachelor. I live by myself and spend all my free time learning languages. I could speak to you in Russian, but I am ashamed of my accent. And of the wrong stresses.'

'Yes, but all the same!'

The waiter leant forward, pressing his finger tips on the table and quoted, haltingly, another four lines of Russian verse.

He took a small but thick book out of a pocket of his white jacket – a Russian grammar printed by some unknown publisher in Marseilles. It was an absurd and rather pointless grammar book, somewhat akin to the famous grammar of my childhood days by Margot which it was then the fashion to deride. The examples in which Margot abounded were particularly idiotic: 'Golden hares do not want to run along green ropes.' 'This day, is it not a Monday?' 'Fall asleep, my dear grandmother, in front of the warm fire in the hearth.'

The *garçon* brought us a grey-haired and angry-looking taxi driver, Monsieur Maurice, who quite unexpectedly turned out to be a kind, good-humoured man, and he gladly agreed to take us in his taxi all over the Camargue and the west coast of Provence in the direction of Spain.

The Camargue is the delta of the Rhône, a vast swampy

stretch of low lying land, overgrown with high reeds and covered with numerous lakes and lagoons. Black bulls bred for bullfights in Arles and Nîmes graze in the Camargue; and white horses. Many of my readers must have seen the French film *Crin Blanc*, about the touching friendship of a village boy – a native of the Camargue – and the free and wild horse called White Mane. The plain comes down to the sea. There, amidst the rustle of dry reeds, huddle small fishermen's hamlets, deserted, a little gloomy, quite unlike all those near-by fashionable resorts, dazzling and spicy, such as St Tropez, Nice, Cannes and Menton.

An old church, grey, cold and empty, rises up like a piece of rock on the very edge of the sea in the hamlet of Ste-Marie-de-la-Mer. The sea wheezes underneath the altar as it sucks itself into the shore. A few candles burn here and there, and the walls are festooned with ribbons, bells and clumsy childish drawings of boats and steamships which look like tubs. The ribbons and the bells are left there by the gypsies. Once every so many years the representatives of gypsies assemble here from all countries of Europe and in this church elect a gypsy king. He 'reigns' for several years. A woman in a thick warm shawl followed us into the church and told us that the recently elected gypsy king, a native, she thought, of Austria or Hungary, fell in love with a young gypsy girl from somewhere near Riga and went to live with her there. The woman – a simple fisherwoman – laughed and joked that there was a king even in our revolutionary land.

The awkward drawings of boats and ships (even of paddle steamers) are hung on the walls by the relatives of fishermen and sailors at sea to save them from storms and other maritime dangers.

Another interesting little town was situated to the west of Ste-Marie-de-la-Mer, on the other side of the Lesser Rhône and was called Le-Grau-du-Roi. It was a fishing port with two lighthouses, piers, silence, sleepy boats, and fishermen in orange tarpaulin coats. We spent two days in Le-Grau-du-Roi – two serenely quiet days amid the clatter of wooden *sabots* and the

weak singing of skinny little girls dangling dolls on the thresholds of houses, among popular cafés and the bell ringing – as though it were always fading away – from the empty church.

A narrow lagoon cut across the town and disappeared in the distance, somewhere in the sandy plain where a third mysterious town – Aigues-Mortes (in Provençal this means 'Dead Waters') stood on the edge of the lagoon fifteen kilometres from the sea shore. In Le-Grau-du-Roi the lagoon was spanned by an iron bridge with a decking – unique in the world – of thick ships' ropes tarred and tightly tied together. Three-ton lorries could cross this bridge in perfect safety.

According to the oldest inhabitants, we were the first Russian visitors to Le-Grau-du-Roi. This fact occasioned not only an access of curiosity and hospitality on the part of the locals, but genuine admiration as well. We were invited to cafés, offered food and drink and asked questions about mysterious and icy ('br-r!!') Moscow. In one café the fishermen triumphantly produced one inhabitant of Le-Grau-du-Roi who had been lucky enough to have visited Russia. He turned out to be a little old man, purple with shyness, with a face covered like a hedgehog with a terrible white bristle, too tough, obviously, for any razor. The old man was very embarrassed and looked at us with an expression both guilty and gentle. We discovered that he had at one time been a sailor on the French battleship *Jean Bart* and during the civil war in 1919 had been in Odessa with his battleship.

All the time we spent in Le-Grau-du-Roi the weather was somewhat cold and misty. The sea quietly grumbled round the piers. At night, very clean red and white lighthouses flashed intense lights along distant and invisible shores. At daybreak fishing boats went out to sea, returning at noon. The two or three hotels – the refuge of summer tourists – were closed for the winter. One of them was specially opened for the four of us, heated, fully lit and given a small staff. We passed two happy days together with the staff, eating local food in the empty restaurant.

And finally, the last little town – Aigues-Mortes. By now I feel the reader's annoyance because I have digressed so much both in time and in subject matter from the preceding chapters. My only, not very convincing, justification must refer to the words of the writer Renard whose advice was to write perfectly freely, breaking all the rules and thereby (so he thought) putting the reader into a good mood. I greatly doubt this, but available material very often holds the writer captive and he can shake himself free of it only by writing it down.

Back in the Middle Ages, St Louis, King of France, built an enormous castle on the low dunes not far from the Mediterranean. Sea-going ships could approach the castle along the lagoon which stretched from sea to castle. From there the king could send his crusading armies to Palestine. The castle was called 'Dead Waters' because of the motionless waters of the lagoon. We reached Aigues-Mortes by the evening. The monolithic pile of walls and towers rose up in the crepuscular sky. It rose straight out of the sandy plain. Dry grass rustled at its feet. Around it not a soul was to be seen – not a man, not a horse, not a bird, not a car. The castle appeared uninhabited. This gave it a mysterious, even a frightening appearance. Life must have left this stone fortress several centuries ago, the waters of the lagoon have become shallow, ships no longer sail up to Aigues-Mortes and it is, anyway, difficult to grasp why such a majestic citadel should ever have been built in this flat and sterile spot. We stood and marvelled at the imposing sight. The wind from the sea could be heard whistling in the walls.

Then we drove in through the narrow gates and were stunned with amazement – inside the fortress walls, like a toy in a nutshell, was hidden a delightful little town, with its fountains, monuments, squares, cafés, ancient houses, the sound of gramophones, shops and even a petrol pump. Doves whirled above the gabled roofs. A chapel bell was coughing modestly. Its sound was so weak that it did not penetrate beyond the thick walls. The name of the film in the little cinema shone in red lights: *The Longest Day*. The

number of the town's inhabitants could be counted on one's fingers.

We went into a small dark shop. It was empty, but the bell over the door, roused by us from its torpor, tinkled for such a long time that a young Frenchman with a high complexion – the shop-owner – finally emerged without undue haste from a back room holding a napkin in his hand.

When he discovered we were Russians he threw up his hands and with a desperate cry: 'Françoise! Françoise!' dived into the interior of the shop and brought out of there a pretty young woman, his wife, to introduce her to Russians. Françoise was presumably washing her clothes. She blushed and mumbled excuses as she dried her hands on her apron. Then she brought her little girl aged three, who made a deep curtsy, while the shop-owner brought out an old woman, bent double, and supporting herself on a stick – his mother – and shouted in her ear that she had in front of her the first Russians in Aigues-Mortes. The old woman kept nodding at us affectionately and pressed a handkerchief to her eyes to dry the tears. The impression was that the Frenchman's relatives, lost and then saved by some miracle, had now returned to the house.

Wine, coffee, and all kinds of cakes immediately made their appearance, while smiling inhabitants of Aigues-Mortes, including a great many boys, were pushing and shoving at the door. The boys were the first to announce our arrival and were the last to see us off, accompanying us beyond the town gates as we left for the melancholy plains of the Camargue.

But there is, apparently, no such thing as an unmixed blessing. In that delightful little town I discovered that I had left Imard's address in Paris or perhaps lost it altogether and could not recollect the name of the town where he lived. I cursed myself, my memory and my recent illness which was, as always, responsible for all my misfortunes and above all for my absent-mindedness. We all felt depressed. Even the fact that on our return journey we should stop over at Marseilles failed to console

us. Monsieur Maurice, full of sympathy, suggested the names of many little towns near Marseilles, but none of them seemed to me familiar. Such was the sad ending of the story concerning the Atlantic Ocean chart. Imard and his wife may read these lines and these may serve as an apology.

I shall not write about Marseilles. Think of Odessa, extended a hundredfold, and a hundredfold more noisy, gaudy, multilingual and anecdotal – and you will have Marseilles.

17
The Dutch Cheese Wrapper

The story with a map which I shall now tell happened some time before the one I have just recounted. It had a great influence on my life. It all began with my living (out of sheer laziness) mainly on tea, cheese and sausage while spending a summer in hot and dusty Moscow.

I was no longer living in the basement in Obydensky Lane, but in a communal flat in the Great Dmitrovka Street at the corner of Stoleshnikov Lane, with a fur shop on the ground floor. A scowling wolf, familiar to the whole of Moscow, sat for many years in its window.

I used to buy the cheese and sausage in a grocer's shop near-by. All the sales girls in that shop had fat faces and pink complexions, and wore white overalls over their coats. The overalls were glossy and crackled as the girls moved.

One day my piece of Dutch cheese was wrapped in a scrap of paper which happened to be a map. True to my bad habit of always reading or examining something while having my tea, I started on this piece of map when suddenly my heart missed a beat.

Some of us as children (and even now) like to invent and draw maps of imaginary and magnificent places, usually unexplored and deserted. We each probably invest these maps with our own notions of a terrestrial paradise, of rich and happy lands to which our thoughts go out from our earliest years. And here was a shred of a map of just such a land – and not of an imaginary one

either, but of a real, existing one – lying in front of me. Endless forests, lakes, winding rivers, overgrown roads only just marked with a dotted line, wastes, tiny villages, wood plantations and even inns – everything I had been dreaming about all my life was concentrated here. The torn bit of map referred to the Meshchery forests.

I went there at the end of the summer and it changed my whole life abruptly. It became firmer, acquired a new value – for the first time I really got to know Central Russia. From then on an immense love for my own, till then almost unknown but truly native, country has never left me for a minute wherever I happened to be – in Calabria or in Turkmenistan, in the damp and rainy Baltic states or in the Alps.

For one's native land, as for one's mother, one always finds an excuse. It is only a son who can understand a mother's heart and penetrate its hidden tenderness and affection, its torments and its modest joys.

After Meshchery I began to write in a different way – with greater simplicity and reserve, avoiding showy things and grasping the power and poetry of the most unassuming souls and seemingly most insignificant things – as the breeze over the common bringing with it the smell of smoke and swaying the red-brown plumes of horse sorrel.

Another map, too, has played a big role in my life – the map of Kara-Bugaz. To it I was partly indebted for the first of my books having attracted attention. But this was all. In the rest of my life Kara-Bugaz has left no noticeable traces.

18
Desert Trial

At last I got a little money for a trip to Kara-Bugaz. With 'Konotop's' blessing I managed to obtain some leave from ROSTA and left for the Caspian in the late spring. My plan was to take a train to Saratov and to go on by boat to Astrakhan.

The periodical *Nashy Dostizheniya* ('Our Achievements') gave me an order for two sketches – one about the Kalmyk Republic and the other about the Emba oil fields ('Embaneft'). From Astrakhan, therefore, I had to go to Elista – the capital of the Kalmyk Republic – thence back to Astrakhan, then by boat to Guryev, a town in the Urals where the 'Embaneft' offices were located, from there back again to Astrakhan and finally (again by boat) off to Mangyshlak and Krasnovodsk. From Krasnovodsk I had to use whatever means were available to make my way across the desert to Kara-Bugaz.

For the first time in my life I was going 'in search of material' for a book. I was then still such a naïve writer that this fact filled me with some pride. But I realized very soon that one must never make a special point of looking for material and behaving like an outside observer; instead, one must simply live while travelling or staying anywhere one happens to be, without trying to remember everything.

Only then does one remain oneself and impressions are absorbed directly, freely, and without any previous 'screening', without the constant thought of what can and what cannot be

utilized for a book, what is important and what is not. Memory will eventually make the necessary selection.

As far as Saratov the train went very slowly across the fields and ravines of Central Russia. I spent two days in Saratov, living in a suburb close to the river. All the houses had smart-looking dovecotes towering over them and vast numbers of pigeons wheeled all day long in grey-blue flocks over the courtyards.

Then the old steamer *1812* put off to Astrakhan. A portrait of Field-Marshal Kutuzov[56] hung on the wall of my cabin. The lower Volga was an obvious gateway to the desert – stretching past us were the clay banks of the river, the yellow water flaked with oil, the misty ochre-coloured sky.

We were hungry. In the ship's buffet bar they served nothing but rather meagre herring and weak tea together with a small piece of stale black bread. In the train and particularly on the ship I was amazed by the persistent and seemingly chaotic movement of crowds of men and women which I then met for the first time. The whole of peasant Russia seemed to have left home and be on the move, filling trains and boat decks, in their search for anywhere more peaceful and with more food. The deck was crammed with these silent folk, their chattels and rags. Almost all of them had sacks of potatoes and dry rusks of black bread. The younger women washed grey-looking underclothes and swaddling clothes all day long, babies yelled and screamed, old men and women hummed to themselves the prayer: 'Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy and immortal, have mercy upon us!' To the accompaniment of this dreary and lugubrious chanting the boat was steaming ever farther south. Out there, from dawn to dusk, a brown haze hung over the horizon. Dust settled on everything. The cabin smelled of dust. Sand crackled between one's teeth.

The first camels appeared on the sun-baked banks. After a hungry winter the wool came off them in large wads, and the bald patches, mauve on their lean flanks, could be clearly seen from the

decks of the boat. The camels gazed dispassionately at the steamer as it glided past them, and ceaselessly chewed what must have been thistles or wormwood. Green saliva in long, viscous threads dribbled from their mouths.

I thought of one of Ilf's sayings, that travelling requires powers of psychological endurance. He was right, of course. Astrakhan with its herrings and its dry climate suddenly revealed itself in the distance in a thick red haze and the smell of stale fish. The haze was not dispersed even by the violent gusts of sultry eastern winds blowing from the so-called Bukhara side. In Astrakhan I lodged with a young local author and journalist. He lived on the Varvatsky canal, in a small green house with a tiny garden. His wife, a sickly girl, had grown a lot of flowers, particularly nasturtiums in the garden and it struck me as paradise. The flowers smelled cool. Their eight-month-old son had died recently. The young woman was depressed and frequently cried by herself in her room, while her husband sat in his newspaper office till late at night.

I waited gloomily for an opportunity to leave for Elista and the Kalmyk steppes. But the opportunity did not present itself, and I wandered about the town and along the banks of the Varvatsky canal. That murky and deserted canal made on me the impression of a faded dream. The only oasis in town was the invariably empty, cool picture gallery. I often visited it, looked at pictures by Nesterov,[57] Saryan[58] and Kustodiev[59] – a native of Astrakhan – and wondered how those pictures got there and whatever for. Throughout the time I stayed in Astrakhan I met only a few people in that gallery. I could not believe Velemir Khlebnikov was born and had been brought up near Astrakhan.

At last I left for the Kalmyk steppes. It was spring and they were covered with oceans of dark grass. In the mornings hundreds of larks would break out of this grass, fluttering their wings and spattering dew all round. The dew glittered in the sun and it seemed as if some strange rain rose up above the surface of the earth and hung over it, while above it the air was limpid and clear.

The truck rushed, swerving from side to side, past haughty golden eagles sitting on the edge of the wide road. Not one of the eagles so much as moved, though the vehicle almost touched them as it tore past. The eagles did not even bother to turn their heads to look at us and at the dusty, thundering contraption in the body of which we shook and rattled, jammed between piles of iron bedsteads and barrels of salted fish. The driver threatened the more insolent eagles with his fist, but this made no impression on them. The fearlessness of the eagles surprised me. My travelling companion – an old land surveyor, who knew these steppes – explained to me that golden eagles liked sitting by the roadside for the simple reason that vehicles frighten bustling marmots and jerboas. The marmots then start rushing about all over the road without rhyme or reason and the eagles catch them lazily and surely. The vehicles apparently play the part of foxhounds or harriers in raising game for the hunt.

We took our places in the truck not in Astrakhan, but in the dry, grey hamlet of Kalmytsky Bazar on the right bank of the Volga. Just before we left, the head of the car station entered the names of all us passengers into a route book. He entered our home addresses and the addresses of our next of kin. I signed my name in that battered book just as travellers must have done in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

'Anything can happen out in the steppes,' said the head of the car station. 'We do have a spot of trouble here occasionally. It's the first time you are travelling here?'

'Yes.'

'In that case, watch the driver and copy him in everything. Don't drink water out of wells he won't drink from. Don't go inside *yurtas*[60] which he avoids entering. He is an experienced man, the driver. Otherwise you might catch trachoma or worse.'

These precautions struck me as excessive, but I soon realized that the head of the car station was right when we stopped for a minute and several old Kalmyks with their eyes bleeding as a result of trachoma, came up to the truck. Where their eyelids

should have been, there was raw flesh. The old fellows squatted next to the truck and in sign of approval went on for a long time slapping the hot, dusty sides of the truck with the palms of their hands. They admired the vehicle and apparently considered it as something sacred. All the men had large bundles of stone-hard *barankas*[61] hanging round their necks. Later I saw many Kalmyks wearing these *baranka* necklaces. The number of *barankas* indicated a man's wealth: the more *barankas* he wore the richer he was and the more haughtily he behaved. We met few *yurtas* on the way. We raced past caravans of unbelievably lean camels. They carried new telegraph poles on their backs. The poles were tied to them cross-wise.

Towards midday mirages made their appearance. The entire steppe, from the wheels of the truck to the farthest horizon, was flooded with sheenless, opaque water. The impression was that we were rushing along a vast, frighteningly large puddle. Burdock stalks stuck out of it like tops of submerged trees. The oddest thing of all was that this dry and greyish water began two to three metres from the truck, but the driver never reduced speed and the water receded with the same speed with which the truck approached it. The water seemed to pour away from us. The sight was tiring and sent one to sleep.

'Is this a mirage?' I asked the driver.

He looked puzzled. He did not, I discovered, know the word 'mirage'.

'No,' he said. 'It's just the steppe showing you tricks. This is nothing! Sometimes it shows you a sea with a whole forest growing on the shore.'

On our way to Elista we met only one hamlet built of adobe bricks. We skirted round it. A scorching sun beat upon the hamlet and the hamlet breathed out blistering heat even at a distance. Petrified camel dung stuck out of cracks in the walls. Yellow Kalmyk hunting dogs did not chase after the truck, but hid, terrified, in the courtyards with their tails between their legs. Children gazed nervously at our truck accompanied by its sky-

high pillars of dust. Here and there in the gullies oozed a putrid, green water. The sun shone dimly. Towards midday the sky turned yellow and took on the appearance of a gigantic cloche, painted over with ochre. Town houses have their windows painted this way in the summer sometimes to abate the intolerable glare of the sun.

At last Elista appeared in the distance – new, low-built houses, so many little cubes scattered without any visible plan up the slope of a hill like a flock of white sheep. In Elista I discovered that the main efforts of the authorities were directed towards combating the various diseases which had been undermining the health of the Kalmyk population from time immemorial.

Medical detachments were working in villages, hamlets and *yurta* settlements. Before treating diseases, the Kalmyks had to be broken of the habit of witchcraft and primitive methods of doctoring. Thus, for example, to cure trachoma the Kalmyks rubbed their sick, bleeding eyelids with granulated sugar, and to cure tuberculosis they burned the skin with smouldering felt. The main sufferers from tuberculosis were the women, because of their national dress, the *kazakin*. It tightly squeezed the girls' chests from early childhood and never let them develop.

Moreover, the women wore heavy head-dresses known as *shlyk*, vast contraptions which caused the development of tuberculosis of the cervical vertebrae. A short time before my arrival, Kalmyk women had been forbidden by government decree to wear *kazakins* and *shlyks*.

On our return journey to Astrakhan we spent a night in the steppe and I witnessed one of those extraordinary evenings that happen only in the great expanses of the steppes.

The wind had dropped. The air had become completely limpid. The grass had cooled after the heat of the day and breathed out freshness. Heavy dew had fallen on the grass. Cries of quails crossed and re-crossed the steppe with measured and unceasing regularity. A smell of mint was in the air.

The driver told me that beyond the next hill there was a sweet-

water lake. I went down to it through the long grass. Fish rustled in the rushes. The sun was setting and I had the impression that ultimate silence had descended on the earth and I would never again hear a human voice or a motor horn or the rumble of a car. There was a certain grandeur in that silence, as if the universe were resting, ready to meet the night carefully approaching it from the violet east.

The sun was setting, but was obviously being dilatory about it. Perhaps it was keen to see the thin thread of light which was bound to stretch from the ever mysterious first star to the surface of the lake. Darkness fell somehow immediately. All night long I tossed and turned, my nerves on edge, unable to sleep, because of the slow progression of the night. It became visible through the change in the disposition of the stars overhead. The constellations swam on, hardly revolving round the invisible axis of the universe.

The low-lying, northern shores of the Caspian Sea, right down to the beginning of the sea itself – very shallow in those places – are overgrown with a wide bed of reeds known as *chagan*.[62] Their hard, black racemes or 'maces' resembled small corn cobs or – a somewhat far-fetched simile this – typewriters' ebonite rollers. From afar *chagan* looked like a broad black ribbon stretched out along the sea-shore.

From the mouth of the Volga down to Guryev, situated in the lower reaches of the river Ural, there is not a single landing-stage, a single harbour where a ship could take refuge during a storm. And yet, of course, shallow waters can have very high waves and navigation near the *chagan* beds is therefore unpleasant and sometimes dangerous. The ship *Heliotrope* took over twenty-four hours to reach Guryev from Astrakhan. It was a very old, respectable ship with a host of copper and brass fittings. Copper handrails, copper-bound ladders, copper instruments and lastly a huge, copper loudspeaker, through which the skipper shouted to the passing wherries and shipping boats – all this was cleaned and

polished till it blazed. All that glitter was positively oppressive. As on the Volga steamer, peasants lay untidily on the deck. Elderly women were particularly numerous.

It was said that reeds were burning at the mouth of the river Ural and that they were set on fire quite deliberately in order to destroy the nests of innumerable mosquitoes and gnats which made life unbearable to man and beast.

The sky by night seemed to be winking strangely and dimly. Those dull flashes were totally unlike our summer lightnings or the approach of a thunderstorm. What thunderstorm could there be with the atmosphere for hundreds of kilometres devoid of so much as a trace of moisture!

The *Heliotrope* entered the Ural at dusk. It steamed quickly past the burning reeds. The flame crackled and ran along the river banks, the smoke choked us and made our eyes smart, and only in Guryev could we at last breathe freely – in that squat little town where all colours had long ago been bleached by the sun to an ashen grey.

In Guryev I lived on the left bank of the river Ural in one of the new houses built of pressed reeds. They were in no way different from ordinary stone houses. I shared a room in the 'Embaneft' hostel with a former sailor of the Baltic Fleet – a Latvian. He had come to Emba from Baku in connection with some oil business. When a wind rose at night the sailor would wake me and say:

'Stand from under! Better not sleep. This house of cards may easily crumble and squash us like kittens.'

From Guryev I occasionally went to Emba together with an old oil engineer, a Pole, Jablonski. That corpulent and extraordinarily calm old man, much given to banter, initiated me into the amazing and exciting mysteries of oil prospecting, of oil (salt) domes and everything connected with oil drilling.

We lived, he and I, in a hamlet called Dossoreh. The windows in our room had no glass. Instead there was close wire netting against gnats. Whenever the wind blew from the near-by Caspian

Sea, straight from the bulrushes, the gnats flew in in gigantic clouds dimming the light of day.

'What is a desert?' Jablonski would ask me as he lay in the evening on his creaky bunk, careful not to move for fear of raising whirls of dust: it had time to settle on us in thick layers in as little as half an hour. 'A desert,' he would reply to his own question, 'is dust; and again, nothing but dust; and gnats; and again, hot and salty dust, and the absence of water. Have you tried to splash a bit of water on the soil here? You have? Then you must have seen how, instead of being absorbed by the earth, it turns into large drops, little balls of water if you like. These drops, which resemble mercury, roll and jump about in the dust as on a hot slab, and get all furry with dust. That's how it is, my dear fellow. Just as in Kipling's verses about India – dust, dust, dust raised by marching boots. No air to breathe with. That must be frankly admitted. Therefore, shouldn't we go off to the lake, where the derricks are, take a few measurements and check the oil flow? In any case, you don't play chess, and to read in the light of this anaemic lamp is tantamount to going blind.'

I would agree and we would set off to the salt lake, where the derricks stood on piers and the oil pumps wheezed as they pumped up the creamy, golden-brown Emba oil from under the earth.

I took quite a fancy to this walk to the lake. The water – thick and salty – had a strong smell of iodine. The few lamp-posts standing here and there on the jetty threw a dim light on the coarse-grained salt which had settled in pink crystals on the piles. The lake water smelled not only of iodine, but also of oil. The smell gave the false impression of a cool night. In fact, however, the night was saturated with a very fine warm powdery dust, and it was possibly the dust that gave the lamp light a pearly, stifling colour.

'Everything you see here,' Jablonski said to me on one occasion, 'differs in no way from oil drilling in the Maracaibo Lagoon in the South American republic of Venezuela. Oil

deposits originate and are formed, there and in Emba, in precisely the same way. That's why they send us, oil engineers, over there. And incidentally, forget your dreams about going to Venezuela. You won't find anything there even which is in any way better than here.'

'I have never dreamed of going to Venezuela.'

'A pity!' said Jablonski. 'One must dream always and of everything. But dreams mustn't be sterile, of course. For instance I welcome all dreams about the cultivation of the desert. Particularly when they assume a practical shape, as they do in our own country here on the Caspian: Emba, Mangyshlak and Kara-Bugaz. There are occasions when nature cannot be left to itself. It must be directed for the good of humanity, but of course without interfering with its basic laws. Human happiness depends very little, if at all, on the progress of civilization. Happiness is an eternal category. Petrarch's happiness was unaffected by not being able to hear Laura's voice on a gramophone record. Civilization will yield its most splendid fruits when the peoples themselves – the peoples only and no one else – will be the lords of their own lives and the masters of their own fates.'

Back in Dossoreh we sat on the jetty on logs and as we inhaled the stifling dusk of the Transcaspian night we spoke of taming the desert. Afterwards, I went to my room and read till far into the night a battered book of poems *Sand and Roses* by Lipskerov,[63] whom I had not heard of at the time. One of the room's innumerable former occupants had forgotten the book in a table drawer when he had left. I read slowly, repeating his verses on Central Asia and Samarkand and making them scan to myself. Jablonski slept soundly, his arms crossed on his chest. My ears sang with the silence of the desert in the night. Only occasionally I could hear the wheezing of the sleepless pumps on the lake as they sucked up the viscous oil from the lifeless bowels of the earth.

I have described the rest of my travels in the Caspian lands in

Kara-Bugaz and a number of sketches. The whole trouble about books such as this (I mean *The Restless Years*) or rather autobiographies, is that repetitions are almost unavoidable, since virtually all writings are to a large extent autobiographical. The writer Alexander Malyshkin once expressed this view to me very well if a little crudely: 'I have distributed my life amongst various stories and novels. And I haven't even left anything to myself, anything I could tell, should occasion arise, to friends or to a woman I love. Awfully silly! Do you remember, Blok says it?:

Life has long ago been burnt and told,
One's first love remains in dreams.'

I shall, therefore, not repeat what I have said in my earlier work. I want to recall merely the words which I wrote at the time: 'I decided to write not only about the fact that deserts hold vast riches which must be acquired and utilized . . . A country, and especially the USSR, cannot have deserts.' This became the theme of the book.

Should a reader want to compare *Kara-Bugaz* and those sketches with my present reminiscences, he must not be surprised at a certain lack of similarity between the two. The reason, of course, is that I was young then and somewhat verbose, but with age I have become more reticent, if this is the right expression, in my prose. And, besides, the present has thrown its reflection on the past and the past has appeared in a new guise – some colours have faded while others have become brighter. I shall therefore confine myself here to the shortest possible account of my journey to Kara-Bugaz.

From Guryev I went back to Astrakhan and thence, on a steamer just as old as the *Heliotrope* (its name escapes me), on to Mangyshlak and Krasnovodsk. The steamer had masts rigged, as in the old days, with shrouds. The accommodation in the steamer was cramped. The heat of the engines penetrated everywhere, together with the smell of shashlyk from the galley. The sea was calm and bright. This time there were no peasants on deck;

instead there were fat, noisy people who drank Kakhetian wine all day long. They were taking a hundred sacks of potatoes to Krasnovodsk and absolutely refused to sell even the smallest amount either to the passengers or to the crew. It all ended with someone, just before we put into Mangyshlak, ripping up several sacks – and the potatoes pouring out into the sea with a kind of hasty gurgling sound, to the furious screams of the sack owners who had been awakened by the noise. I expected blood to flow, but the owners of the sacks suddenly and unexpectedly calmed down and set to work stitching the damaged sacks with coarse thread.

Mangyshlak, on first impression, was as hot as proverbial hell. The only thing that led one to make peace with that bare bit of ground baked by the heat, was the memory of Taras Shevchenko.[64] Here he languished in a punitive battalion, but even here he did not lose a jot of his talent, his goodness and his love for the Ukraine. It seemed a miracle, but it was true.

Farther south we sailed past shores so deserted and monotonous that we could not help averting our gaze from them. Kara-Bugaz appeared on the horizon like a dome made up of vague exhalations and then beyond the black and jagged Ufra cliffs, Krasnovodsk suddenly revealed itself – like the open jaws of a fire-breathing dragon, the crater of an Asia burnt to ashes, its gypseous soil and its atmosphere as thick and viscous as glycerine.

All that followed I then worked into *Kara-Bugaz*, some of it a little exaggerated, some quite unvarnished and some seemingly more gloomy than it actually was. But the one respect in which I did not have the heart to colour or ornament my prose was in the description of men and events. I wrote about them as accurately and as simply as I could. But I made up for it, as the saying goes, on landscapes. And I deserve neither praise nor blame for seeing them to the last detail precisely as I described them.

The only thing of which there is not a word in the book is my terrible, occasionally quite unbearable nostalgia for Central Russia. The air burnt my lungs, the heat seemed to weigh down

on my brain, the brackish water tore at my throat. Tight, smarting pain took the place of that freshness, as wonderful as the air after rain, which helped one to think out there in the north. The blood seemed hardly able to force its way through the taut contracted vessels of the brain.

In the mornings, while it was still possible to move about in Krasnovodsk, I used to go to the railway station and look with longing at the scorching goods trucks. They seemed to me to be the only real bond with Russia. I sat in the shade, gazed at the trucks in a demented sort of way and listened to the dry crackle of rifle-fire. The sound came from the Gypsum Gorge which the Basmachi[65] bands had approached, led by the famous Junaid Khan. Our troops were fighting battles against the Basmachi. The spent bullets, said the soldiers, took a long time to cool after they had fallen on the ground. The battle was short. The Basmachi withdrew to Persia and silence returned once more to our shores.

And the heat seemed to have thickened everything around it so much that even the surf caused surprise – how could the ponderous waves possibly muster enough strength to rise up and run roaring but exhausted over the sweltering beach and then flow back again, their roar spent?

19
A Mixture of History and Geography

The writer Semyon Hecht once said to me that all my novels and stories were nothing but a mixture of history and geography. At the first blush I failed to understand whether this was good or bad. But I soon stopped worrying and came to the conclusion that Hecht was right and there was nothing terrible about it.

I was never able to write about people divorced from their circumstances and physical situations or the geographical co-ordinates, the landscape or the simplest natural phenomena. I could not separate man from the varied reality which surrounded him – if I did, the man immediately died. I have always been amazed by writers indifferent to the external circumstances of their characters. People torn out of these external circumstances have always seemed to me mere cardboard figures endowed with one rare gift: they were capable of acting and speaking without any reference to the season of the year, the wind or the rain, the flowering of gardens or storms off the sea-shore – without reference to many important phenomena which seemed to have no meaning so far as their internal life was concerned. It has always seemed to me that literary characters like these are not live people, but experimental beings for the use of writers and dramatists, taken by them for vivisection.

Truth to tell, even Dostoyevsky is not free from blame in this respect. He deliberately placed people in agonizing situations

excogitated in the quiet of some dark and gloomy study. He wrote about events with journalistic starkness. Nature is practically absent from his novels. A short story, or, occasionally, a novel based almost entirely on dialogue creates a suffocating atmosphere for many readers.

After this explanation (which I have been forced to give) I can, with a clear conscience, head this chapter: 'A Mixture of History and Geography', since this is what it is. I must merely beg the reader not to bear me too much of a grudge if this chapter will contain more geography than history.

I wrote *Kara-Bugaz* in fits and starts – in Moscow, occasionally in Berezniki in the northern Urals, sometimes in Livny.

In Moscow I wrote by electric light in a dark cubbyhole of a room, which was the only quiet spot in the noisy communal flat.

Then ROSTA sent me as their correspondent to the building of a huge chemical combine in Berezniki on the Kama. Opposite Berezniki on the other side of the Kama, the ancient city of Usolye – the former capital of Stroganov,[66] the Urals' uncrowned tsar – was sending up into the air sluggish billows of polar smoke. In Usolye Stroganov cast and coined his own money. Two tall log towers – salt works – were preserved in the town. Salt had been produced in them by the process of evaporation.

The salt works had become black with age. Their walls glistened like anthracite. The lights on the building site were reflected by these walls during the whole long polar night. The salt works looked like sullen snoopers left there by the Stroganovs to observe the new uninvited masters of this gloomy land. The snoopers stood with their heavy caps – the roofs – pulled over their eyes and kept a disapproving silence.

Work on the building site was carried out by prisoners. The whole undertaking impressed me as being unnecessarily vast. It consisted of various factories – one producing sulphates, another caustic soda, and several others – a thermal electric power station and an enormous expanse of multi-coloured pipes.

It was night, the long polar night. At first I wandered for a long time among foundation trenches, piles of bricks, cement slabs, rail lines, concrete mixers, girders, excavators, unfinished buildings and heated shacks. I had difficulty in finding my way to the small hotel left over from the days of the old soda factory. The hotel was a warm, but by no means a safe refuge. In each room there were about ten to twelve people. Those of us who, like me, stayed sober were kept awake for nights on end by drunken quarrels and brawls.

We were particularly annoyed by a former actor, now a book-keeper – an old man with a crop of skittish little grey curls like some drunken cupid. Every night he would tumble into the room and start hurling empty bottles at the electric bulb hanging from the ceiling until he finally smashed it.

At the slightest attempt to make him see reason, he would fly into a towering rage, and throw bottles at his room mates with all his might. And in the morning, hardly yet sober, he would sit down at the deal table cluttered with unfinished bits of food, and clutching his head with his hands, would sing, choking back his tears:

Oh, do not tell me that youth is ruined,
Or that my jealous love has wrecked your life . . .

One of the hotel bedrooms was referred to as an 'isolator'. It was reserved for non-drinkers. The 'isolator' never had free bunks. But luck was with me – the hotel manager, without my needing to ask him, squeezed me into it.

'Out of harm's way,' he said. 'They'll maim you here, I shouldn't be surprised, and I'll be held responsible. You are a Moscow correspondent, after all.'

In the 'isolator' I could at last breathe freely and sleep to my heart's content. The occupant of the next bunk to mine was a charming man – a deportee chemist, a university lecturer, I think. We had frequent talks about poetry, Mayakovsky's verse and Alexey Tolstoy's short stories; he was tactful, quiet and

reasonable and longed for his wife and small son. He did his best to conceal his yearnings from me.

I woke one night to the sound of clanking glass and opened my eyes. The chemist was quietly getting a bottle of vodka from his bedside table. Very carefully he filled his glass to the brim and emptied it in one gulp. He then poured himself out another glass and drank the contents with the same absence of noise. I pretended to be asleep. The chemist lay quietly for a few minutes, then suddenly sat up in his bunk and yelled in a piercing voice:

'Monsters! I'll hang myself! May you be damned, you filthy curs!'

An hour later he was taken away to hospital. He resisted for a long time and had to be tied and bound by the male nurses.

My next room mate – a wrinkled old engineer with a military bearing – said to me reproachfully:

'What the hell did you come here for? A lover of powerful sensations, no doubt! I'd push off to Moscow if I were you.'

However, in spite of this cheerless atmosphere and environment, I met many people in Berezniki as fanatically devoted to their work as artists – in my experience the most frequent example of such devotion. As I have already said, the work in Berezniki was carried out by deportees. But deportation is one thing and work another. Their condition as deportees in no way affected the selflessness of their work. They were the first, according to the chemical experts, to set up machines and installations which they had never seen before. In the past they had only dreamed about them or else read about them in foreign scientific and technical journals. Indeed, there was much to amaze the layman and strike him as being nothing less than a miracle.

My most frequent visits were paid to the electric power station – the thermo-electric power plant where the tremendously high steam pressure made the British Babcock-Wilcox boilers, tall as three-storey houses, hum and vibrate on their buffers.

Soon I became familiar with the whole building area and its factories, and went up on the roofs of gasometers, inhaled the

poisonous fumes of nitric oxide, drove about on railway engines and tractors and always carried a gas-mask with me. At the slightest whiff of some unfamiliar smell oozing out of goodness knows where, the gas-mask had immediately to be put on as a protection against suffocation.

All this life on the building site took place in the darkness of the polar night.

It was December – the north's darkest month. At first, that long night appealed to me. In the morning frost, voices had a special ring to them as they called out to each other in different languages (there were many British and German specialists among the engineers working in the combine), the runners on the sledges made a whistling noise and at times the snow, illuminated by the arc lights, fell in shoals from out of the darkness of the sky.

The northern lights, unstable and evasive, would flare up now and then, casting a reddish and unpleasant glow. And beyond the confines of the building area the night lay heavy and drowsy like an enormous beast which had laid itself down for its winter sleep over hill-sides and storm-swept forests and mountain slopes. Gigantic Ural firs stood there like black pagodas and on starry nights touched the stars with their crowns.

But that winter the starry sky was seldom revealed above the building site. There was altogether too much smoke on the earth, smoke of all shades and colours from a canary-yellow 'fox tail' to violet, brown, red, white, and blue-black. The sky was always covered in smoke.

I saw the real Urals when I went for several days to Solikamsk, where by that time the potassium mines were already working. The mountain slopes, some steep, some gentle, sank into snow so unsullied that it seemed fresh from last night. In actual fact, however, the snow had been lying for a long time, certainly no less than three months.

The fir trees' paw-like lower limbs were entangled in the heavy snow. Dear little imprints of hares' feet skipped about everywhere,

but only as far as the railway track. There they turned sharply back – for some reason the hares were afraid of crossing the rails.

A clear, slightly haze-dimmed sky showed green at the line where it met the earth. Out there, beyond the railway, lay lands entirely unknown (at least to many people, including me). There, into the dark stretched out ancient Biarmia – country of gloom and raw wealth – mineral and coniferous – of hard men who battled against nature, of bold and dissolute couriers of the Tsar, of seekers of gold who rolled out carpets in front of their feet along the impassable autumn mud, a land of sudden and crazy enrichment and of poverty-stricken huts in which hordes of red cockroaches rustled throughout the night.

It was rich, that land, and therefore considered happy. In 'far-off Biarmia' there were many precious stones. Its emeralds were clear and dark, as dark as the green shroud of the endless, frighteningly vast expanse of coniferous forests. The sharp turpentine smell of these forests spread far beyond Perm, beyond Vyatka and Kostroma, reached ancient Moscow, city of the Tsars, and frightened the foreign merchants and seemed to them to smell of bears, terrifying and bitter, as bitter as the Russian marsh berry – the *klyukva*.

I thought of this as I gazed into the window of a ramshackle and cold truck, dragged along by a dirty and untidy-looking engine from Berezniki to Solikamsk. I knew that the action of several of Mamin-Sibiryak's[67] stories and, as far as I know, of Boris Pasternak's[68] long short story 'Lyuvers' Childhood', took place there. It can probably only happen in Russia that the same source of ideas and feelings (in this case, the north Urals) provides inspiration to two such dissimilar writers. However, they do have something in common – a sharp feeling for Russia with her jaw-stiffening morning frosts and the cold murmuring of leaves in deciduous forests.

Solikamsk. The furious racing of shaggy *troïkas* from the tiny railway station to the dour little town, the red felt boots of the coachmen, their piercing whistling, the frantic ringing of the

bells attached to the painted and decorated shaft-bow[69] – 'We are the tops,' the coachmen seemed to sing out, 'hold on and don't funk at the sharp turns' where sledges skid and sway so much that one's heart stops beating. It was night by the time we sped into the streets of Solikamsk. Past us rushed lonely and bright electric lamp-posts, low stone houses like chandlers' shops, white alabaster churches, cast-iron plates hanging on low posts at street corners. The measured strokes of the night watchmen on these plates marked the night hours.

I was given a bunk at a monastery, turned into a hotel: vaulted corridors impregnated with the age-old smell of vegetable oil used for icon-lamps, a coldish cell. Two girls – students from Leningrad doing a practical course – were sleeping on the neighbouring bunks, just visible in the dusk. Both of them struck me as being beautiful, obviously because they had golden plaits which lay in disorder on their pillows (by that time almost all young women cut their hair like boys and therefore these plaits appeared to me particularly touching). I went to bed quietly so as not to wake up the girls, and could not fall asleep for a long time listening to their calm breathing and occasional sighs. And for some reason they appeared to me – even though I could not see them – as if they were very close members of my own family, my younger sisters.

The night watchmen continued to strike the hours at street corners. The night shed a weak, mysterious light through the windows. And I blessed that night, in that inconceivable Russian backwater, for the warmth of the girls' breathing – I kept imagining I could feel its slight breeze on my face – I blessed the night because I felt drowsy and relaxed, because I was happy to feel next to me the chaste freshness of these two girls, and their light dreams. When I awoke in the morning the girls were no longer there.

I went to see the potassium mines, went down into the very deep drifts cut out in the transparent mass of glistening topazes and amethysts (such was the colour of potassium salt – carnallite

and sylvinite), saw the blind pit-ponies meekly pulling little trucks loaded with minerals. In some places I was almost knocked over by underground draughts. I spent a long time wandering along the wide and empty adits, looking like fabulous, palatial apartments with a host of starry lights, golden and blood-red, playing on the walls. The elegant beauty of these underground galleries, their cleanliness and glitter, the fresh air blowing from invisible pipes – all this made them look like palatial corridors. They led – quite naturally – to elegant ballrooms. There would have been nothing incongruous in hearing the muted strains of an orchestra, women's laughter, the crackle of folding fans and the sound of Cinderella's slippers as she ran out of this magnificent palace. I took up with me to the surface a number of large carnallite and sylvinite crystals, but in my little hotel room they melted like sugar within half an hour and turned into cloudy, coloured water.

I was loath to leave Solikamsk. That bleak town greatly appealed to me. I was hoping to meet the Leningrad girls again, but the hotel porter – a fussy monk with defective speech – told me they had left for Cherdyn, still farther north.

I spent another night in the room with its tenuous smell of 'Red Moscow' perfume as the only reminder of the two girls, and in the middle of the night I was awakened by the new lodger. He was lying on his back and was pulling off his boots which he had hitched on to the back of the iron bedstead, grunting and shaking the whole room as he did it. I felt like throwing him out. In the morning I left for Berezniki. An inexplicable sadness pursued me afterwards for several days. Up till now the memory of Solikamsk brings with it a feeling of sweet sorrow.

Every night in Berezniki I visited the office of a small newspaper published on the building site and went on writing *Kara-Bugaz* there. The office was located in an old empty hut, in a cubbyhole behind a wooden partition. I fastened the door with a huge iron hook and felt safe. In early spring I went back to Moscow, wrote the sketches about the Berezniki construction

commissioned by *Rabochaya Gazeta* (they came out later in book form under the name *The Giant on the Kama*) and immediately afterwards I left for Livny to stay with the Shatskys and finish *Kara-Bugaz*.

Nothing had changed in Livny and for that reason I liked it all the more. At first I took up my abode on the edge of the town where I rented a room in a large timber house. As one walked in it the whole house swayed and creaked and was about to collapse at any minute. Besides, it was the scene of a number of sad events which I wrote about in *The Golden Rose*. Mrs Shatsky therefore made me move out and stay in her house.

A year had passed and once again gentle spring timidly opened the leaf buds on the trees, buds like a child's lips, tiny and sticky, and the sun shone through the apple blossom. The blossom seemed pinkish and crisp in the light, like paper seals. But all this, I have described in *The Golden Rose*, while *Kara-Bugaz* tells of my experiences there.

If all the days I had spent writing *Kara-Bugaz* were to be added together, it would be seen that I had written it fairly quickly – in about three months. It was published by a house specializing in children's books. The editor of the series was a former Estonian Baltic Fleet sailor, Heinrich Eichler. All the so-called 'children's writers' of the older generation remember him well. He did many a kindness to all of them. At the beginning of the war he was deported to Karaganda and died there shortly afterwards. He was deported because someone had denounced him as being a German rather than an Estonian.

The first man to have reacted to *Kara-Bugaz* was Sergey Tretyakov.[70] He sent me his book as a present, inscribed: 'To the mirabilite of Russian literature.' Mirabilite is the name for the strong salt found as sediment in Kara-Bugaz Bay. This scared me. My attitude to Tretyakov, a determined man who always knew what to do, was in any case one of respectful fear, like that of a boy to a grown-up. Besides, all kinds of readers' conferences about *Kara-Bugaz* were being arranged and I threw everything

up and fled to Solotcha in the Meshchery forests. I was free – after my trip to Berezniki I left ROSTA for good.

In Solotcha Frayerman and I hid in the remotest reaches of the Oka, where even the Solotcha boys could not penetrate. We lived there blissfully, in the shade of ancient willows and by the side of camp fires, slept on hay, drank an absolutely fabulous, gorgeous tasting brew – tea, boiled in a pot together with the ashes and mosquitoes that had fallen into it – and were happy.

20
Cannon Factory

An odour of frozen potatoes and aniseed mixture hung over Murmansk, a sweetish and unpleasant smell which obviously came from the direction of the Barents Sea. The dark and heavy waves of that inhospitable sea had an iron glint to them. I did not envy people whose first experience of a sea was the Barents, whereas it should have been the Black Sea or even the Sea of Azov. People are often unfair in their attitude not only to their fellow humans, but also towards natural phenomena, and more especially to seas. It is usual to regard the Sea of Azov as if it were a puddle or a marsh, yet it is warm and full of fish and its western part is remarkable for its beautiful, vividly green water. The colour of this Sea is particularly striking when steep waves rise up to a limpid crest, with the sun shining through them, and then collapse on the beach with its myriads of tiny shells.

But the Barents Sea gave no comfort or joy. Though it was already May, the icy cold blast that came from it made one's face feel stiff. The white nights had come to those latitudes, but they had nothing in common with the white nights of Leningrad, none of their gentle melancholy. All they had was the hard light – as icy as melting snow. All houses at Murmansk at the time (Spring 1932) were built of logs and the town was untidy and littered with wood chips.

I went to Murmansk without any real need to go there. If the town had not been standing at the edge of the continent, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean, and had not marked the end of the

railway line, I could have said that I got there on the way to somewhere else. I went north, to Karelia, in order to write the history of the Onega factory. The factory was in Petrozavodsk and there was no need for me to travel beyond that town. But my undying curiosity forced me to visit Murmansk first. And I do not regret it.

I saw the Barents Sea, the stony, lichen-covered beaches and the tundra beyond the Arctic Circle. The tundra looked like those vast war cemeteries of the First World War. But instead of rising crosses it had trunks of sickly birches with broken off crowns, more like rotting birch poles than anything else. In the tundra the tops of birches became dry and fell off. I saw the huge fishing fleet and the northern mountains near Lake Imandra and the reindeer which had something in common with rabbits. Neither the one nor the other could, I thought, be considered as animals in the full sense of the word – they were, in my estimation, far too weak for it. I saw the edge of the grey ocean, Kildin Island and a leaden sky ironed out by the ceaseless winds.

Great indeed must be the courage and powers of endurance required to voluntarily condemn oneself to a permanent life in that part of the world. I felt a constant need for warmth – the ordinary warmth of an ordinary Russian stove – a need for the most elementary sense of comfort exuded by a cup of strong coffee, the latest issue of *Ogonyok* and the shiny, motionless leaves of a potted palm. Finally, after a few days in Murmansk I escaped to the south, to pleasant, hospitable, leisurely Petrozavodsk.

It was the editorial board of 'The History of Factories' series (thought up by Gorky) that suggested I should write the history of the Onega factory. Out of a long list I chose the Onega factory in Petrozavodsk because it was a very old factory, first founded, indeed, by Peter the Great for the manufacture of cannon and anchors; it then became an iron foundry (where the railings for Petersburg's quays and gardens were cast) and in the 1930s it produced road-making machinery – graders – an indispensable,

indeed an honourable job of work, I thought, in our roadless Russia.

On arrival in Petrozavodsk I began collecting material for the history of the factory. Its equipment, machinery, buildings and even the manners and customs prevalent among its workers represented an extraordinary mixture of various epochs – from Peter the Great to the early twentieth century.

I roamed the streets of the town aimlessly and 'roamed out', if one can say so, the plot of my book *The Fate of Charles Lonceville*. I wrote in some detail about this in *The Golden Rose*. I refer to that book so often because it is almost entirely autobiographical and could be one of the parts of *Story of a Life*.

Had I had a lot of free time subsequently, I would certainly have written many more books. The fact is that every finished book is in a sense the nucleus of a nebula which has had its existence – a stormy existence – within a human being, a star born out of that nebula and with an acquired light of its own. We include perhaps no more than a hundredth part of our lives in the narrow confines of our books, while ninety-nine per cent remains outside and is preserved only in our memory, a useless and yet a significant and valuable cargo.

The impotent regret of things we could have done, and yet have not done through laziness, through our amazing capacity for killing time, the necessities and the cares of life, this regret comes to us, as a rule, too late. How many interesting things we could write if we did not waste our time on trivialities!

The writer Alexander Grin once estimated how much time a man wastes throughout life in asking the question: 'What is the time?' According to his estimation, several days. And if all the useless and mechanical words we utter were added together, the result would be several years.

In mechanics there is a concept known as the 'efficiency factor'. Now, a man's 'efficiency factor' is negligible. We are horrified when told that almost eighty per cent of the steam produced by a locomotive is released into the air and wasted, but

regard with perfect equanimity the fact that nine-tenths of our life we 'release into the air' without any profit or joy to ourselves and those around us.

But these passing thoughts merely distract me from my story and prevent me from continuing it.

While in Petrozavodsk I paid a visit to the Kivach Falls and saw that 'diamond pouring mountain', to quote Derzhavin.[71] I saw many silent lakes with their pewter-coloured water, breathed in the all-pervading smell of bark so typical of Karelia, listened to folk songs from the country beyond Lake Onega, sung by an old woman, as they had been by the minstrels of old. Songs born out of the arctic night and arctic grief, saw our timber-built Florence with its churches and monasteries, sailed on the lake itself and still have the impression that it is bewitched and has remained inviolate since the time when the primordial silence of the earth had not yet been broken by explosions of gun-powder.

I have never for a minute lost my affection for that part of the world, immersed in the diffused northern light. Life in Petrozavodsk at the time was comfortless and rather hungry. I lived and had my meals in 'The Peasants' House', eating boiled turnips without salt, grated and mashed into a greenish mass. The food was nauseating. 'The Peasants' House' where I was staying had been built by the best carpenters of the district. They had decorated its walls with magnificent fretwork for which the north is famous. Dances took place in the evenings in a large hall smelling of bees' wax. Blonde Karelian girls, tall and muscular, in tight bodices and light, billowing skirts appeared at these dances every night.

I frequently visited a housing estate, called Golikovka, built for the factory-workers and situated in its vicinity. I always took the opportunity to visit the district museum as well. There, next to huge fragments of pink and gold-coloured mica, were exhibited samples of heavy and magnificent iron castings, as well as of lace.

In that museum, where I was alone, for apart from an old woman guard there was hardly ever anyone there, I realized that until then my behaviour, like that of most visitors, had been irrational and had resulted in unnecessary tiredness. I tried as much as possible to look at everything. After half an hour I would have a dull headache and would leave jaded and aching in every limb.

It was surely absurd to try – however sincerely and eagerly – to learn in some two or three hours about things which men had taken whole centuries to create and many, many years to accumulate.

After my first acquaintance with the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad and later with the Louvre and other museums and picture galleries, I came to the conclusion that museums in the form in which they exist at present – as vast collections of man-made masterpieces and natural curios – do more harm than good. They trivialize people's attitudes, foster superficial knowledge and make for cursory – and entirely sterile – impressions.

I considered that it would be far more sensible to organize small museums devoted to only a few artists or even to one artist alone (like the Musée Rodin in Paris or the Golubkina Museum in Moscow), or to a definite and not very long period of our history, to one particular branch of knowledge or to a geographical area within the country – northern USSR, for instance, or the Volga region, the Caucasus or the Soviet Far East. A far more vivid impression is left by, say, the ruins of ancient towns, than by a collection of objects connected with these ruins and exhibited in glass cases.

The wind blowing over the remains of ancient basilicas, the permanent bitterness of wormwood, warm lichen, so rough to the touch, silly thrushes pecking at small lizards carved by ancient artists on marble pillars blackened with age, the sky, blue and deserted, flowing overhead – all this plunges the onlooker into a world of majestic poetry, into a sphere of the distant past which unexpectedly, becomes so very close. We understand the past

more easily under the open sky than in great rooms with polished, sparkling floors. I had that feeling in Pompeii, in Kherson, in the ruins of Nikopolis in Bulgaria and in St Rémy in Provence, where frogs leap from under one's feet into the bottomless Roman cisterns with their black water.

Having cursorily examined the museum in Petrozavodsk, I chose mica for special study – that transparent, laminated and flexible (and therefore strange) mineral shot through with a multi-coloured glitter. I started by carefully examining different kinds of mica, from black to golden and from violet and deep green to smoky white. Within each lamina one could see many hair-thin cracks formed in accordance to some unknown physical law.

The next day I went to an institution whose complicated name I cannot remember and which was responsible for mica extraction. The people there were surprised, but let me have some literature on the subject and generously made me a present of several pieces of multi-coloured mica. It split easily into extremely thin, almost microscopic laminae. The oddest thing was that these laminae, separated from a large, very heavy and completely black piece of mica, turned out to be white and transparent.

I read everything I could about mica and about its remarkable, even mysterious, qualities. I found my newly-acquired knowledge enjoyable in itself, even though I did not, at first, intend to use it. True enough, my knowledge of mica added romantic charm to Karelia. I saw the mother-of-pearl glitter of mica everywhere I looked – in the water of Lake Onega, in the granite rocks (where it sparkled in myriads of tiny dots as if they had been scattered millions of years ago and had been soldered into the hard stone), in the very air, seeming white because of the light nights in the starry sky over Karelia – it sparkled and gave the impression of being seen through black mica. Even the occasional rain had the appearance of innumerable little mica scales falling on the ground.

Later I decided to write a book about mica. The books of the

French writer Pierre Ampas were very popular at the time. He wrote imaginative novels about the production of various things – the manufacture of scent in the South of France, for instance. I wanted to write that sort of book about mica. And I would have written it – all is possible when one is young – if I had not already started writing two little books which I had first thought of while I was still in the north: *The Fate of Charles Lonceville* and *The Lake Front.*

As I worked at these two books I had a strange experience. Much later I read about this sort of thing in an article by a literary scholar. As soon as I sat down at my desk, took up my pen and wrote a few words about Karelia I would immediately be assailed by the smell of pine and juniper. It would percolate into the room from somewhere, though there were no pines or juniper trees around, only limes losing their blossom (it was in Solotcha).

I would sometimes sit at my desk deep in thought, but in a kind of torpor, then suddenly come to as if awakened from some importunate dream, and would try to recall what it was that happened to me in the course of those few minutes when I had laid aside my pen and sat looking at my manuscript with my head in my hands. And suddenly I would remember. I was squatting down by the side of a forest road trying very carefully to unroll the spiral shoot of a young fern. What for? Just in order to breathe in the tiny bit of cold air tightly sealed within it. There was a smell of pine all around me. Last year's dried-up berries which I had picked off a juniper tree also smelt of pine and of grouse feathers too – the wild smell of marshes and impassable forests. This happened to me several times.

It was not a dream. It was a kind of semi-reality. I was transported back to the lonely cuttings through the forests of Karelia, and the tiny little splashing sounds of the water which edged its lakes with silver.

It was as if I were living right inside the raw material out of which my book was coming into being. It made me almost ill. My longing for a breath of that lake air, for the feel on my face of

birch leaves warmed by the sun, reached such intensity that I could hardly restrain myself from jumping up, rushing off to the railway station, and taking a train back to the northern forests, if only to spend perhaps no more than two or three hours in them, listening to the cuckoos' song, enthralled by their charm. One minute of the slow, leisurely progress of the Karelian sunset was enough, I thought, to cast a spell on any man for the rest of his life.

I left Petrozavodsk for Leningrad and from there went to Moscow using the canal network to do so. I took a small 'lake' steamer which started from the Okhta quay in Leningrad. There were practically no passengers. In the saloon sat only one glum-looking individual: his job was collecting tree resin for the manufacture of turpentine and rosin. He was drinking black ale from small bottles. Ale had then first appeared on the market. The man and the other passengers were all very silent people who showed little interest in the scenery around them. They were presumably frequent visitors to these parts. Endless forests stretched out along the banks of the Neva. Here and there they parted to reveal some neglected park with the ruins of a magnificent palace, or a granite staircase going down to the edge of the water. Willow herb with its purple flowers grew out of cracks in the steps.

Past Schlüsselburg the steamer entered Lake Ladoga. The sky had blended with the water to form a greyish warm haze. Through the haze we saw an old striped lighthouse rise slowly out of the water. Again my silly dream came back to me, the dream of throwing everything up and becoming a lighthouse keeper. I was convinced that I could stand the loneliness, particularly if I were able to collect a library of choice books for my lighthouse. And of course from time to time I would write.

I peered at the lighthouse and kept my eyes on it for as long as I could. The skipper – also a silent man from the north – gave me his black binoculars. Through these I tried to see what was

happening in the lighthouse. Nothing in particular, apparently.

A large copper bell, green with age, hung from the balcony. They signalled to us, using flags to do so, and we replied. They were apparently asking us to tell the people at the next stop to send them some 'Cannon' brand cigarettes (a popular brand at the time – very fat cigarettes, which really looked like tiny cannon barrels).

Geraniums – those general favourites among flowers – grew in a large pot on the lighthouse windowsill high above the water. This appealed to me. There must have been a woman living there, but I did not see her.

Then, as dusk fell, began a mysterious shifting of the elements. There were no clouds. The haze had dispersed, and its place was taken by a pink radiance which seemed to settle on the water in layers and began slowly to flare up until the whole western half of the sky and the water was filled with the reddish glow of sunset. I had never before seen such a long drawn-out sunset – its glow never faded, but remained in the sky till the morning and seemed to spread silence over the lake. In the quiet dusk the steamer's port and starboard lights were lit – to no purpose, it seemed to me, since visibility was hardly less than five miles.

We were fortunate. The calm of the day-time gave place to the even greater calm of night. Not a ripple, just the gurgling of the water in the wake. The skipper told me I was obviously a lucky man, since that kind of weather was rare on Lake Ladoga. Occasionally the storms there were comparable to those in the Barents Sea.

On the stormy river Svir we came to rapids and had to be taken in tow as we went up it. Our steamer puffed and huffed as it laboured against the current, helped by a powerful tug boat. I remember the long fishing villages stretching along the banks of the Svir, boats with prows curved like the necks of swans (as the boats of the ancient Novgorodians used to be), the singing of women on rafts beating their linen with rollers.

From the deck I would often look northwards in the direction

of Olonetsk – a wooded land, poor and 'forsaken by God and man' as they said in the past.

I had long wanted to go there. For some reason I had always imagined that there, of all places, something simple and very good was going to happen to me. As I grew older places in which something good was bound to happen to me became more and more numerous, till at last I felt myself in my imagination to be an old resident in many, many places. In every province, in every region I would look for and find the most attractive spot and would, in a sense, 'appropriate' it. Generally, they were little known places in north Russia: – Olonetsk and Kargopol, the Kyrillo-Belozersk monastery, and Cherdyn; in central Russia – the attractively named Sapozhok,[72] Zadonsk, Narovchat; in Belorussia – Bobruisk; in the north-west – Gdov and Ostrov, and many other places besides. So many that life would not be long enough to visit them all.

The Olonetsk country now spread out on all sides – shy and sterile. The wind which got up towards the evening, cold and rain-laden, was bending the osier bushes growing along the bank and whistled through them.

In the little town of Voznesenye on Lake Onega the passengers were transferred to a tiny, so-called 'ditch' steamer. It by-passed Lake Onega through another canal coming out at Vytegra and then proceeded farther along the Maryinsky network. The steamer was so old that it had no electric light and not even kerosene lamps. The cabins were lit by paraffin candles burning in tin lanterns.

The lanterns made the night appear even denser and more impenetrable, and the places through which we were passing even more remote, inaccessible and deserted, as indeed they were. Occasionally, I would come out on deck, sit for a long time on a bench next to the funnel, gaze into the darkness where the wind was sighing through trees of endless, invisible forests, looming black in the distance, and it seemed to me that by some miracle I had been removed from the twentieth century back into the

fourteenth, and that if I were to leave my steamer I would immediately disappear and vanish, and that I would not meet a single human being for hundreds of miles, nor hear a human voice, only the barking of foxes and the howling of wolves.

The real backwoods began after we passed Vytegra. This timber-built little town with grass everywhere like green carpets, was the key of the Maryinsky canal network. From all sides came the sound of water as it flowed down from slimy moss-covered dams. White churches, stern in their simplicity, stood on hilly slopes. Old birch trees grew in gardens. In the dusk old women with black kerchiefs on their heads sat on benches at their gates, tatting lace and waiting for their cows. The streets smelt of milk. In an old house with stone vaults where the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate was now lodged I noticed a raspberry-coloured letter-box, with a white inscription on it: 'Box for complaints against individuals treating the proletariat with scorn.' I photographed that strange box, but a year later, when I again happened to pass through Vytegra, it was no longer there.

One sunny cool morning I awoke in my cabin and looked out of the window. I had the impression that I was still asleep and having an absurd childish dream: our ship was slowly steaming along the narrow canal as through a kind of trough, while below it, creaking, hay-laden carts were passing from one side of the canal to the other. The canal here was in fact enclosed in a trough and raised over the surrounding land. The hay carts were followed, typically, by shaggy dogs who barked at the steamer as if they had a grudge against it. The drivers whipped the horses which were just as shaggy as the dogs and screamed at them. The horses changed into a trot and left the steamer behind them. The drivers whistled and roared with laughter. Our helmsman finally lost his temper with the drivers and their yelling and whistling. He poked his head out of his glass booth and shouted:

'You scum, you filthy bastards! You try and get on to this boat, any one of you, we'll soon throw you out – and you'll bloody

well have to walk two hundred kilometres from here to Belozersk. I won't forget your faces in a hurry!'

The drivers quickly calmed down and dropped behind us. They did not so much as look at the steamer after that – they even averted their gaze from it. Just in case they did hit the boat and would then really get it in the neck.

The incident was soon over and then we came to the famous 'stairs', a steep 'staircase' of locks placed close to, indeed well-nigh touching, each other. To get over this aquatic 'staircase' our ship took almost the whole day. The passengers went ashore and walked to the top lock. There they waited for the steamer, drank tea and gossiped in a neighbouring village and some even sorted themselves out in haylofts and had a good snooze. The women picked flowers along the road, and one of them, the brightest of the girls, nipped round to a village she knew and brought back a basket of eggs.

Then our steamer followed the coastline of the White Lake. It really *was* white, though with a bluish tinge to it, like skimmed milk. Occasionally, a light wind would wrinkle its surface and cover it with patterns, as if worked over by the old northern niellists. The secret of putting black patterns on to silver was lost by then. It was said that one elderly master was still working in Ustyug Veliky, but had no apprentices, as he would have had in the old days.

At other times the wind would strike the water directly from above, a sort of perpendicular blow, and cover it with a different – a star-shaped – design. Again, in those same old days – old, yet not so distant from our own – that particular design was used to ornament the great, tin-lined chests of the more thrifty and efficient housewives. Those chests with their famous padlocks which give out a ringing sound, and 'sing' when you opened them can still be seen in small towns even now. One of the characteristics of these locks was that long drawn-out sound – the chest would have been locked a long time and yet would ring and ring as if filled with bells and jingling coins. The secret of that pattern

on chests, the so-called 'frost', is also forgotten. Connoisseurs of that rare folk art just sigh. No one takes the trouble to resuscitate it. Besides, tastes have changed. The modern young peasant woman working on a collective farm is not likely to buy herself a chest of that sort to put her best dresses in.

Belozersk was old, quiet and overgrown with nettles and goose-foot, and even the arrival of our steamer failed to enliven its quay. Only small boys, to their honour and credit, milled about on the bank and tried to force their way on to the ship in order to gaze, for the hundredth time, at the engines, but were not allowed to. It seemed as if apart from inquisitive, freckled, sharp-eyed urchins, everything in that little town was plunged in sleep.

The steamer entered the river Sheksna, flowing through long-inhabited places, with venerable villages and stone-built churches and lofty pine trees, steep banks, and with pale, wide horizons, filled with a multi-coloured crowd of clouds.

High up, the wind was blowing, the clouds streamed on inter-twined and mingled in the running light of the sun and in the earth's reflected glitter, causing the sky to take on the semblance of a vast rag rug.

While we were moored at the quay in Poshekhonye – since the days of Saltykov-Shchedrin[73] that little town was considered the prototype of the backwoods – our steamer was visited by a party of schoolchildren from some remote village. Their teacher, a girl, was saying to them:

'Look close! Try and remember! This, now, is a steam-driven engine, it's like a fiery steed. See how its steel rocker shafts glitter. Next spring we shall take you by steamer as far as Cherepovets. You must get used to everything.'

The children's faces glowed with delight, and one little girl, with three pigtails, asked in a sing-song voice:

'Can it so-a-r up to heaven, this engine, if you give a big twist to the wheel?'

'You go and ask the mechanic,' said the resin collector to her

(he was still on board the boat). 'He will give it a twist and we'll fly up to the clouds.'

'No!' replied the girl, after some reflection. 'I don't want to. I'm earthy.'

On the Sheksna I could not sleep at night. The river banks rang with the trill of nightingales. It drowned the flip-flop of the ship's paddles and all the other sounds of the night. The strains of the nightingales' song reached us without intermission from the wet shrubs and the thick bushes which grew on the banks. The steamer sometimes hugged one of the banks and brushed against the supple, bending branches, hanging over the water. But this did not in any way disturb the nightingales.

Such a luxuriance, such an insane, carefree peal of flooding sounds, such a feast of birdsong I had never heard in my life before. And will probably never hear again.

I went back to Moscow with a feeling of regret, fully realizing that after so much travelling I was lost, and would never again, perhaps, as long as I lived, be able to stay in the same spot for any length of time. And this is precisely what happened.

21
The Flaming Colchis

The timber-built hotel in Poti swayed and creaked as if shaken by an earthquake. Stocky, fat little Vaso – the elderly Gurian in charge of the hotel – was very angry with the guests if they made a noise running down the stairs, particularly if at the same time they sang a song fashionable at the time:

We went out in a boat,
In a golden, golden boat.

'What are you jumping about for, man, like a wild boar?' the old fellow would shout. 'The roof will fall on your head, and what will you do without head or roof?'

Hot-tempered Vaso was constantly squabbling with his equally hot-tempered guests. Rows flared up suddenly, like an explosion. They generally started in broken Russian, then having reached boiling point, changed to Georgian, and ended in such a furious torrent of clicking and smacking noises that in that frenzied screeching the last vestiges of any kind of language were irretrievably lost. The rows died down just as suddenly as they started, as if a sound-proof door had been slammed shut.

Postcards with 'Old Tiflis: a typical figure' were pinned with drawing pins to the wall behind Vaso's desk. They were pictures by an unknown, but definitely gifted artist. Vaso absolutely refused to sell these postcards. He had pinned them up entirely for his own pleasure. One of the postcards, by the way, represented a round-figured, angry old man with a crew-cut, who looked very

much like Vaso himself. His baggy grey *sharwary*[74] tied tightly round his ankles, billowed out behind like a balloon. He wore white socks stretched over the *sharwary* and held up by pink garters. A Caucasian belt with a silver buckle lay on his belly and during his screaming rows it jumped up and down as if taking part in the wrangling.

Immediately after my arrival Vaso came into my room with an enormous, fat volume in his hands for the registration of guests. As he was entering my name in that book in the attractive Georgian script, he asked me in his ill-humoured voice:

'Why have you come to Poti?'

I explained that I had come to Poti to work on a book about the drainage of the Colchis marshes. For some reason Vaso's temper rose.

'What are you singing to me about marshes for, man – like a nightingale?!' he shouted. 'You tell me at once – what did you come for?'

I repeated that I had come to study the drainage of the Colchis plain.

'You think I don't know why you've come?' screamed Vaso in an even louder voice. 'You think I'm an old ass and that I'll believe you've come to dig marshes? Tell me the truth and look me straight in the face, or you won't get a room in this hotel!'

Vaso threw my official pass back at me. The usual row was starting up. An old woman – Vaso's wife – came in panting. She crossed her arms on her chest, looked at me with her eyes full of entreaty, and shook her head reproachfully:

'Such a good heart you have, and yet you're trying to deceive an old man.'

'He doesn't want to tell the truth!' Vaso was shouting. 'As stubborn as a buffalo, that's what he is! He hasn't come here to rob a bank, so why not say?! I won't give you away, man! Ask anyone in Poti whether I have ever given anyone away. How dare you think things like that about me?' Vaso's daughter came run-

ning in – a young woman with a shock of such coarse hair that she seemed to be wearing a tangled black wire wig.

'You have no right to think of me like that!' Vaso went on shouting. 'When they stole Nonashvili's horses, did I give away the fellows from Supsy?! I see! You don't know who gave them away, do you? You are ashamed to own up to an old man!'

I had enough of that incomprehensible row.

'I'll simply go to the police station,' I said, trying to out shout Vaso.

At that his daughter seized me by the shoulders and burst into sobs.

'No!' she cried. 'He is not telling the truth about himself. He has no idea who stole the horses. And never had any. He is innocent. If you complain to the police, I'll tear my hair out and will throw myself into the Rioni. Tell him why you've come and he'll calm down. And that'll be that.'

Vaso sat down on a chair and wiped his wet neck with a yellow handkerchief. His breath came out with a kind of whistle, as if he were suffering from asthma. Having finished with his neck he began savagely rubbing his chest, which was covered with sweat and grey hair.

'See what you're doing?' screamed Vaso's daughter. 'You have a stone where your heart should be.'

'All right, friend,' said Vaso's wife in a conciliatory tone. 'I'll say myself why you've come to Poti. I've guessed it.'

I was dumbfounded.

'What have you guessed? What do you want me to do?' I asked. I felt my head turn.

'You're a photographer!' she cried joyfully. 'You'll be photographing people in the bazaar. Where's your picture, though? I can't see it.'

'What picture? What are you talking about?'

'Ha-ha, he doesn't know!' said the daughter. 'How can you possibly work without it?' She tugged at her belt in a rapid gesture and turned her multi-coloured skirt round her waist;

in the heat of the row her skirt had twisted itself round. 'Well then,' she kept repeating, 'where's your picture with the head cut off? Where? Or do you intend making photos on the beach of all sorts of naked girls? I'll scratch their eyes out one day with these very hands.'

Now I understood what picture she was shouting about. How many times have I seen, placed next to street photographers, chipped canvas representing a typical Georgian with a dagger! He would be sitting, hand on hip, on a bay steed of the Kabardinian variety. The rider's head would be cut clean off. Anyone being photographed could thrust his own head into the resultant hole and come out on the photograph a dashing horseman. An inscription under the steed read: 'Khaz-Bulat the bold rides home.'

'I am not a photographer!' I groaned in despair.

'What are you then?' hissed Vaso, and taking up the visitors' book he hurled it angrily on the table. 'Why did you come to Poti? To print counterfeit money?'

'I know!' cried Vaso's daughter, delighted. 'I know, father. He has come because he wants to spend his time in the bazaar!'

The noise immediately abated. They were all looking at me expectantly and in joyful amazement.

'All right,' I confessed, 'if you like, I have come for the sake of the bazaar' – I had no other way out.

'Oh, that was not very nice of you,' said Vaso in a tired, but pacified voice. 'Why wouldn't you say a word? You're not deaf and dumb! If you've come for the sake of the bazaar, it's all right by me. That's what we'll put down in the book then. You can live here as long as you like. Lord, how you've frightened me!'

Vaso left with his wife and daughter, reassured and quite happy. And later in the afternoon somebody, Vaso's daughter no doubt, put an empty tin on my table with several large red roses in it. So began my friendship with Vaso, a friendship which from then on remained quite unclouded. He turned out to be, for all his quick temper, a good-natured and lazy old man.

When leaving for Colchis, to go to Poti, I had, as always, imagined that town to be more attractive than it in fact was. From afar I had pictured it shaded from the burning sun by old walnut trees and mimosas with spreading branches; the mimosas exuding a sweet and fading scent, like smart and fashionable women.

Once in Poti, I realized how false my general preconceptions were and how dangerous for the right understanding of life. There was nothing in Poti which in any way resembled my expectations, except for the mimosas. On the other hand Poti had a large port in which cargo-boats swung slowly round to the noise of the water cascading around them like so many malachite waterfalls. The purpose for which the boats came was to load manganese ore. The concrete structures of the jetty and of mooring installations in the port were made red hot by the sun and smelled of dried crabs.

A crowded old tram went from port to town (the town was situated beyond the river Rioni). It was surprising the tram was not burnt up by the sun in the course of its slow journeys and equally surprising that the passengers did not get sunstroke.

The Poti (Colchis) marshes stretched right from the edge of the town and as far as the distant Gurian Mountains. By midday steam rose up from them and it looked as if they were boiling, and went on boiling till evening.

The river Rioni, as yellow as *kizyak*,[75] rushed through these marshes with incredible speed. It was constantly trying to overflow its flat banks and flood the town. The water of the Rioni curled on itself forming funnels and whirlpools, and death from drowning seemed inevitable for anyone who fell into the river. Even using the bridge to cross the Rioni was a little frightening.

All day long the sun beat down on the town's low houses. The fan-shaped young palms planted along the streets afforded no shade. Heavy, classical (pink) roses blossomed in front gardens and shed their petals on the pavements where they formed rapidly yellowing piles. The smoke of fried onions and mutton and the smell of sour wine oozed out of the houses.

Those readers who hanker after a clearer picture of Poti could read my book *Colchis* but I realize that Poti in that book is made to appear in somewhat too favourable a light. That is how I saw the town and can do nothing about it. I cannot change my own vision.

Sometimes even to me Poti seemed like a tropical hell, a place fit for convicts, something like New Caledonia, especially when the blinding glitter of sea and sky plunged it into torpor.

Frequently, the oppressive silence of the day would be interrupted by the distant, and rapidly growing roar of a thunderstorm. A downpour of rain, like a wall, coming from the direction of the sea, would overwhelm the town to the accompaniment of a frenzied croaking of frogs. The shower would crash down in curtains of water, bringing with it a sinister darkness. Steam would rise up from the roofs. But the rain would rapidly move on in the direction of the mountains. Nowhere else have I seen such limpid, ultramarine puddles as those which remained on Poti's streets after these rapid, short-lived downpours.

Daily I visited the construction works called Colchidstroy. The Senior Engineer, Nodia – a noisy man, but reasonable enough – fed me with information on the work done in Colchis for the creation of Soviet sub-tropical agriculture. Nodia would occasionally give small supper parties in the local tavern, in the course of which he would propose – he loved doing it – some flowery toast.

'We have among us,' he would say, 'an Academician, a pen of gold, who has come down to visit us. He will write his swan song about Colchis.'

I could not argue with Nodia – he was so good-natured that one could not bring oneself to make objections to what he was saying. Besides, I realized that 'Academician', 'pen of gold' and 'swan song' were merely the necessary flowers of post-prandial eloquence.

In Poti I got to know a young Georgian who was an engineer. He joined Colchidstroy under the name of Gabunia. If I had to

describe him in two words I should say that his main characteristics were those of a sceptic and a poet. These two, on the face of it irreconcilable characteristics coexisted, or rather were totally fused in that gentle and reticent man.

What attracted me most in him was his rare ability to combine his vast reading with daily life, with his work in Colchis (Gabunia was in charge of the building of a canal in Chaladidy), with all kinds of people, with country-wide events and with his own personal life.

Whether he read Strabo or Montaigne, Professor Krasnov's articles on sub-tropical agriculture or Baratashvili's poetry, Vámbéry's *Travels* or Grigorovich's *Retvisan*, Blok's poetry or Wallace's *Tropical Nature* – in all he found ideas which corresponded to his current interests.

I consider that meeting him was the most profitable event of the whole of my trip to Colchis. It helped me to know and appreciate Colchis in the light of that sharp and harsh new reality which was essential in order to be able to imagine the country's near future. Gabunia took me to Chaladidy. There I saw the jungle for the first time. However, I had to exert my willpower not to catch the 'jungle sickness'. I have not invented that sickness. It really does exist, though by no means all people who find themselves in the jungle fall prey to it. 'Jungle sickness' is the sudden fascination one feels for these impassable and overgrown forests (they have very few birds) with their stifling, intoxicating air, brown earth, silence, mighty creepers, stagnant rivers misted over by sultry heat, the champing of wild boar and the constant feeling that somewhere close by undiscovered mysteries have their abode. And even though those mysteries do not in fact exist you live in constant expectation of meeting with something new and never yet experienced.

In the evenings Gabunia and I would take a tram to the port and sit for hours in an empty restaurant on the pier, listening to the sound of the waves breaking on the rocks and gazing at unknown ships, their lights winking, approaching Poti from the

open sea. On one occasion Gabunia said, as if telling me a friendly secret:

We are, my Muse, fleet-footed, you and I,
We love the trees that grow along the road,
The sound of rain so cool, and far away
The sight of silver sails.

' "Fleet-footed muse",' he repeated. 'Good, isn't it?'

'It is,' I agreed.

'The fleetest-footed muse is that of Pushkin.'

He said nothing more and sat bowed over a glass of wine. And it seemed to me that I had a great poet sitting in front of me. He had never written a single line of poetry, but no matter, his life and his work were filled with poetry, manifest poetry even if indirect.

The ships were coming into port. Their lights danced on the waves and it always seemed to me that they were particularly bright because they had crossed a vast expanse of sea air and had somehow absorbed its purity.

'If a man has a feeling for space,' Gabunia once said, 'this is enough to make him happy. It is a noble, a sublime feeling. But unfortunately we do not experience it all that often. A pity!'

And once more I tried to guess who the man was, with such a calm and sometimes sad and mocking expression on his face – a poet, an engineer or simply a man accustomed to ponder on all things?

Nodia, the chief of Colchidstroy, with his usual forthrightness, looked at Gabunia simply as a 'queer fish'. He explained Gabunia's 'queerness' (an inclination for philosophy and poetry) by his bouts of malaria. Malaria is a marsh fever which dulls a man's sense of reality and causes some confusion in his thoughts. On the other hand, Nodia valued Gabunia highly as an engineer for his boldness, doggedness and resourcefulness. All the Colchidstroy workers spoke with admiration of the courage amounting to heroism with which Gabunia had saved the construction

site and works from destruction when after torrential rains the water had come pouring from the surrounding mountains and had flooded Colchis. But I cannot tell this story a second time, since I have already told it in *Colchis*.

One day Nodia and I were making a tour of the drainage works. We were going round Colchis in an old-fashioned two-horse carriage, a so-called landau. In a little town, Notanebi, we were caught in torrential rain. We were stuck and spent three days in the small, overcrowded wooden house of Nodia's friend, an old schoolmaster, Mingrelian by nationality. From morning till evening the table groaned under the weight of food and wine – *lobio*, *satsivi*, fried fish known as *loko*, kebabs, sulguni cheese, *kupaty*, clay pots with meat stews sharply spiced (*peti*), *chacha* vodka and bitter, violet-coloured Isabella wine. If you ever spilled that wine on your hands, you had the sensation of having cramp in your fingers. It probably contained a lot of tartaric acid.

Whatever time he could spare from eating, Nodia spent either sleeping or frenziedly playing a game of *nardy* with our host to the accompaniment of much shouting and screaming.

To keep me from being bored, I was given tattered copies of the magazine *Palomnik* ('The Pilgrim') for the year 1889. I lay on the sofa and read it almost in its entirety. It contained articles on Palestine, on the cave in Bethlehem where Christ was born, on monasteries on Mount Athos and the Sinai Peninsula, and pious biographies of many a grey-bearded Patriarch, Metropolitan, Exarch and Catholicos.

When the rain abated a little we went to Batum where Nodia had some important business. We remained in Batum overnight. Nodia stayed with friends of his, but I did not feel like disturbing strangers and spent the night in a hotel. It was probably the most terrifying night of my life. The rain was coming down heavily. The hotel was full, but I did not want to leave it and go to another in the pouring rain. The hotel manager's

behaviour was distinctly odd. He said he indeed had a room, but he did not dare put me in it.

'Why?' I asked.

'Oh, well,' he replied with some hesitation, 'it's hard to explain. It's not really a bad room, but it's . . . inconvenient. It's the only attic room in the hotel. Directly under the roof. The stairs are steep and narrow and lead only to that room, and to nowhere else.'

The porter who was listening to our conversation said something to the manager in Georgian. He said it quickly and in a tone of disapproval. The manager pursed his lips, shook his head and repeated that it would probably not be worth my while spending a night in that room.

'Why?' I asked again.

'I don't know . . . Can't say, friend. We don't like letting that room to people.'

The porter again said something to the manager and gave me a nervous glance.

'What's the matter with it?' I asked.

'A man went mad in it the other day.'

'But, surely, not everyone who stays in it goes mad?'

'All the same . . . ' replied the manager evasively.

At that point the porter butted in: 'He went mad in the very early morning, when it was still dark,' he whispered. 'I remember it very well, it was twenty to four when he screamed for the first time.'

'It was very terrifying,' added the manager. 'Particularly when he screamed for the second time. He rushed out of his room, fell down the stairs and broke an arm. He could not explain what had happened.'

'I see nothing extraordinary about that,' I said. 'I can't spend the night out in the street. Show me the room.'

The manager hesitated, then took a key and we went up to the second floor. From the second floor landing there was another flight of stone stairs. It led to a small landing with no doors

giving on to it. But there was a narrow staircase, with no hand-rail, rather like a step-ladder, leading from the landing to the loft. The staircase went straight up to an ochre-painted door.

The manager took a long time to open the door – the key kept sticking in the lock and would not turn. He opened the door at last, but before entering the room he felt for the electric switch near the door, without crossing the threshold, and put on the light.

I saw a room containing an iron bunk and a chair. There was nothing else in the room, but I noticed nothing unpleasant in the room either. I only thought that the very powerful electric bulb hanging from the ceiling cast too sharp a light on the sparse furniture, I even noticed a slight dent which someone's head had made on the pillow. Somebody had obviously spent a night there.

'I don't see anything extraordinary about it,' I repeated though by now the sensation of the room being sealed off from the rest of the hotel by a dark staircase made me feel uneasy.

'You can see for yourself,' replied the manager. 'There's no bell in the corridor. The key works none too well. In other words, better not lock the door.'

He left and only then did I notice that the room had no windows. It looked like a morgue – nothing but yellow walls and a white ceiling. I lay down, but did not lock the door; nor did I switch out the light. The bulb hanging from the ceiling made it difficult to sleep, but I did not want to get up and put it out. The rain came in gusts and drummed on the roof. The dormer window in the loft was broken and I could hear the wind howl from time to time. But I did fall asleep in the end. I woke up suddenly. For a few seconds I lay with my eyes closed, then stretched out and picked up my wrist watch. It showed the time as twenty to four. For some reason this frightened me. Something unpleasant or dangerous was connected in my mind with that particular time. But what? And suddenly I remembered the porter's story about the man who went mad and screamed at precisely that time.

I turned over on my back and a sudden icy shiver ran through

the whole of my body from the back of my head right down to my heels: a square trap-door was wide open in the ceiling above my head. Beyond it gaped the darkness of the loft. I had not noticed that trap-door before. Someone had opened it while I was asleep and had opened it from the inside, from the loft. I did not take my eyes off the open trap and kept repeating to myself: 'Quiet, now – the main thing is not to get excited.'

I quickly looked round the room – there was no one in it and could not be. A centipede could not have hidden in it, let alone a man. But still . . . Carefully I glanced under the bed. There was nothing and no one there either. I then turned my eyes to the dark hole of the open trap and noticed something moving. My heart thumped almost audibly, my temples throbbed. I saw fleshy fingers first of a right hand, then of the left appear slowly at the edge of the trap. The fingers gripped the edge. Up there in the loft was a man.

By the light of the lamp I could see black hairs on the man's fingers and bulging, blue finger nails. The fingers tightened. Someone was obviously pulling himself along by them. A man's head appeared in the hole. I still remember his face. I had never before seen anything more sinister, and probably never will. His flabby face appeared to me enormous. It was clean shaven. The man was calmly and slowly moving his lips as if chewing. Our eyes met and I realized this was death. The man was gazing at me and grinning. He never twitched, made not the slightest attempt to hide. He examined me as he would a victim, taking his measure of me, and then abruptly and quickly raised himself on his hands and lowered one bare foot into the open trap.

He was about to jump down, but made one careless move and a small, pointed crow-bar fell to the floor, jumped and rolled towards the bed. I do not remember how I got outside the door. I must have rushed out with the speed of light. Out on the landing I screamed and immediately fainted. Presumably my scream was as terrifying as that of the man who had lost his reason in that room.

I came to in the second floor corridor. Round me were standing

the manager, the porter and several half-dressed, frightened hotel guests. A strange man with an eastern cast of face, standing in his under-pants, was feeling my pulse. There was a smell of ammonia. Soon the police appeared on the scene. I had enough strength to answer questions and even to accompany the police back into the room. The trap-door was open. A clothes line was dangling from it. The crow-bar was no longer on the floor.

The police rushed by a back way to the loft, but found no one. A police dog was brought. It led the police through the broken dormer window on to the roof and from there to the roof of the house next door, but went no farther.

'Lucky for you, you woke up,' said the senior policeman to me. 'You were up against a cunning and ruthless criminal; or at best a madman.'

The police sealed the room and left. The rest of the night I spent sitting in the hall of the hotel looking at ruined columns with roses growing up them, painted in oils on the walls. Nodia was more excited than anybody else when he heard the story. We immediately left for Poti by rail.

But it is a fact that misfortunes never come alone. At Samtredi station, where we changed trains for Poti, I caught typhus. Famine had started in the Ukraine at the time and thousands of refugees rushed off to the south, to Transcaucasus, to the warm regions where there was enough to eat. They flooded out all the railway stations between Zugdidy and Samtredi. Typhus broke out among them. It was for some reason called 'blue typhus' and was said to be almost one hundred per cent lethal.

I did not, of course, know that I had caught typhus in Samtredi. A few days later I left Poti for Moscow. Up to Odessa I sailed in my old friend the *Pestel* and only in Yalta did I realize that I was falling ill. There I developed a headache, sharp and sudden like a bullet shot. As through a sticky dream I remember the rocking and tossing of the ship off Tarkhankuta, dusty and – so it seemed to me – entirely dead Odessa and the iron-hard upper berth in the railway carriage.

After that I remember nothing. I came to in the Botkin hospital in Moscow in the middle of the night. I was lying in bed under an open window, and through it came a strong smell of lime trees in full bloom in the garden.

It was only in hospital that I learned from old Professor Kireyev that typhus is a disease of the blood. Indeed, I had the impression that my blood had become thick and sticky like carpenter's glue and was particularly thick at night. It then ceased altogether to push its way through the narrow blood vessels. Every night I tried to escape from that tight, creaky movement of the dying blood in my body. But only once did I succeed in creeping out of my bed and reaching the wide-open window in the corridor. The nurse was nowhere in sight.

I knelt down in front of the window, stuck out an unbelievably thin, transparent arm and with the whole thin, bird-like skin of that arm I felt the splendour of the night – its cool wind rhythmically blowing through the lime trees and reaching us, surely, from the stars, and the slight dampness of the grass which overwhelmed me so that I trembled in every limb. It had probably rained a little over that garden towards evening. I realized that that smell promised me life and recovery and I had a sensation of deep-seated coolness as if my fevered body were being washed through and through by a breeze. I breathed wheezily and spasmodically, then collapsed in a faint.

In hospital I had some chemical solution pumped into me by the gallon, but felt almost no pain. I was haunted by the weary sensation of limp and flaccid time impotently dragging itself along. The very concept of time radically changed – the length of each day stretched out to such an extent that one day could accommodate several. Thoughts, too, crept on slowly stretching out like a piece of elastic and incessantly repeating themselves. Not thoughts even, but one single thought or rather the recollection of the night when I knelt in front of the open window. As I lay in bed flat on my back I kept examining my skinny

fingers as if they were capable of revealing my fate, and turned over and over in my mind the memory of the night aflame with stars among the branches of lime trees, the night which in my mind's eye broke up so distinctly into its component parts.

Each part of that night was marvellously wonderful and soothing – the modest winged lime flower lying on the window-sill, the chirping of a bird heard through sleep, the distant drone as if of trees swaying and of the wind sighing through ancient pine-forests around Moscow. For some reason I wanted these forests to be three hundred years old and the resin in the heart of each tree to have an oily red colour. From somewhere that night wafted in the cool breath of water. Perhaps there was a pond near-by or perhaps the wind had brought the smell of rain, the rain that had fallen somewhere beyond the horizon.

At any rate all this had for me more healing power than the strongest medicines. I asked Professor Kireyev to send me to Meshchery (a year before I had seen that part of the world for the first time) and then transfer me to a forester's lodge near the shores of the Black Sea. He smiled and promised. I kept assuring Kireyev that once there, I would lie quietly, drink clear water and eat nothing but wortleberries. And this, as well as the calm and quiet, was sure to restore me to health.

The quiet and silence of the forest appeared to me as something absolutely beatific, particularly in hospital where we heard the incessant roar of aeroplanes flying over from the Khodyn air-field.

The man lying in the bed next to mine was the husband of the writer Lydia Seifullina.[76] As through a dream I used to see that rather plain, small and enchantingly kind woman. Such she has remained in my memory; I hardly ever saw her again and she died a long time ago.

Frequent camphor injections gave me severe phlegmon on the hip. I was operated on lying on my bed in the ward. I was still so weak that the doctor did not venture to have me transported to the operating theatre. After the operation I lay semi-conscious,

with a bandaged leg. It was a hot summer evening, and the door into the corridor was open. A bright electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling shone unbearably brightly and made my eyes smart. Lydia Seifullina's husband groaned in agony in his bed.

Then close by me I heard someone's heavy breathing and opened my eyes. A soldier in a dirty crumpled greatcoat was sitting on the floor next to my bed. He was wearing a fur cap of artificial Persian lamb to which a small piece of red cloth, faded in the sun, had been somewhat crookedly sewn. The cap was too big for him and came down to his earth-brown transparent ears. The soldier had sharp, pointed features and his unhealthy, lemon-yellow skin seemed to fit tightly over his cheek-bones. It shone in the light of the electric lamp as if smeared with oil. Black dust, like lace, lay embedded in the deep furrows of his cheeks.

'Friend,' I asked him, 'how did you get here?'

But he did not answer nor even raise his eyes. Wincing with pain he was taking a dirty bandage all stiff with clotted blood off his leg. As he ripped it off, the bandage crackled like parchment. I guessed that the soldier had entered the ward through the garden, taking advantage of the nurse's temporary absence. (The small hospital block in which I was stood in a garden, and as it was summer the door leading from the corridor into the garden was never shut.)

The soldier's leg gave out the strong, unpleasant smell of a neglected wound.

'What are you taking the bandage off for, old man?' I asked him again; he did not answer but just indicated, with a mere movement of his eyes, the wall next to him.

Only then did I notice a square piece of paper with bold printed lettering:

'All soldiers and citizens wearing bandages must immediately take them off and not in any circumstances renew them until the wounds are inspected by a special commission. Those guilty of the contravention of this order are liable to be tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal.'

I then realized that the soldier was removing the bandage in obedience to the order. I therefore sat up on my bed and also started to remove the bandage on my hip. The cut was very deep and the operation had been performed only two hours previously. Blood spurted out; but before I lost consciousness I managed to reach the bell on my bedside table and ring for the nurse. When I came to there were several frightened nurses clustering round my bed and a cross young surgeon, biting his lip, was applying a new bandage. The bed was covered with blood. The soldier had disappeared. I told the surgeon about him. He merely sneered:

'A common case of hallucination,' he said to the nurses. 'Don't leave him alone for a minute.'

By the end of the summer I was well again. Roskin took me back home to the house in Bolshaya Dmitrovka. I must have weighed very little since Roskin, who was unable to carry so much as a basket of bread, easily bore me up in his arms to the second floor and was not even out of breath.

22
The Stream Vertushinka

In Russia, rivers, lakes, villages and towns have wonderful names which excite our admiration. One of the most apt and romantic names belongs to the little river Vertushinka[77] which twists its way through wood-clad gullies in the Moscow Province, not far from the town of Ruza. Vertushinka whirls, fidgets, murmurs, mumbles, rings and foams round every stone or birch-trunk that has fallen into it, hums softly and talks to itself, whispers and carries very clear water over its gravelly bed. The water flows out of geological strata, ancient and dark – as dark as their age – out of Jurassic clays and Devonian sandstone.

One fact in connection with the Vertushinka seems especially attractive, but somehow difficult to grasp. We have no mountains in the Moscow Province, just a slightly hilly plain, and yet the Vertushinka has brought in its trail large, round, smooth granite boulders which it has been able to dislodge from somewhere. They are boulders left over from the ice age. In the summer they lie in the water's warm stream and doze and blink. They are grown over with red-brown lichen. The water, as it flows round them, hums its simple little song. It is difficult to believe that these good-natured old boulders have witnessed catastrophic events on our earth, and that a glacier dragged them fiercely across the whole of Russia right down from the mountains of Scandinavia and abandoned them here in the cosy Vertushinka to live out their calm and infinite stony existence.

But to go back to names. They are the people's own poetic con-

cept of a framework for its country. They inform us of the character of its people, of its history, its propensities and the nature of its existence. Names should be respected. If ever, in cases of absolute necessity, they are changed, this must on no account be done in an uninformed way, but with a knowledge of the country and a love for it. Otherwise names become twaddle, a breeding-ground for bad taste revealing the ignorance of those who invent them.

Towns should not be given such ill-sounding names that people find it unpleasant to live in them. Plenty of examples come to mind. Instead of calling the town where the Ukrainian writer, Ivan Franko,[78] lived, by the simple and well-sounding name of 'Franko', it was clumsily given the unpronounceable name 'Ivano-Frankovsk'.

Koktebel in the Crimea (an easy and attractive name, incidentally) has been renamed Planerskoye. To begin with, this is ignorant. If the name be derived from the word 'planner' then it should be 'Planernoye' and not 'Planerskoye'. And anyway, this has a Russian adjectival ending yet it hangs in mid-air without a noun to qualify. This obviously is a mystery even to those who have now given that austerely beautiful spot a name straight out of bureaucratic jargon.

A fairly short time ago, almost all the towns, villages and hamlets in the Crimea, with the exception of those on the coast, were hastily renamed without any publicity and without consulting their inhabitants and, therefore, without their consent. The new names do not contain so much as a hint of either the nature or the history of the Crimea. Its most recent map abounds in clumsy, impersonal and sometimes even absurd names. Gone are the names connected with the life in the Crimea of many of our great men. This renaming business reveals an absence of the most elementary education, contempt for the people and for the country and, of course, an absence of any power of invention or imagination.

For hundreds of years we shall be twisting our tongues trying

to pronounce the various Ivano-Frankovsk, while the Vertushinka will continue to ring and flow.

A spacious log-built house, which in the past belonged to the writer Vukola Lavrov, stood overlooking the gullies formed by the Vertushinka. After the revolution it was turned into a rest home for writers, called 'Maleyevka'. I spent three months in 'Maleyevka' after my illness to rest and regain my strength. It was the first time in my life that I found myself in a rest home, living in such close proximity to other writers. At first I felt embarrassed and shy of other people, yet happy that after many years of wanderings and difficulties I had, even if only for a time, a warm, light room with a good writing desk, a small fireplace, carpets and armchairs in which I could sit and read or doze.

In the dining room I was placed next to the cheerful and sociable writer Sergey Budantsev.[79] He taught me to play billiards on a small table, covered not with the regulation green cloth, but with the grey cloth of soldiers' uniforms. It was darned all over. The billiard table stood on an open verandah. Overnight it would become covered with dead September leaves and dry pine needles. Before starting their game, the most inveterate players – the dramatist Shkvarkin,[80] Budantsev and Emile Mindlin[81] – carefully cleared the billiard table of all autumnal debris. If there were so much as one pine needle left on the table, Shkvarkin, chivalrously polite and precise, would flatly refuse to play, maintaining that even an insignificant little bit of down from the wing of a jay or a tit could deflect a ball from its true path and spoil the most brilliant stroke.

Games were played on this long-suffering table in all weathers. When it rained the cloth on the billiard table became so soaked that the balls, in knocking against each other, would press fountains of water out of it. The players were soaked, but this in no way put them out – enthusiasm prevailed over everything. 'Fans' (the word was new at the time) and people who simply liked to talk – 'tongue-waggers' – sat round the billiard table all day long. The chief talker of the lot was Sergey Budantsev – a

thick-set, humorous man with a cheerful and kindly glint in his eyes behind his crystal-clear spectacles. His stories never ceased from morning till late at night. His memory and power of association were extraordinary. A single word was capable of calling forth a story, an anecdote, a reminiscence. Budantsev was a gay man. All his gifts were, it seemed to me, squandered on conversation. He had practically no time left for writing. This, perhaps, explains the fact that he wrote little and was rarely published.

Budantsev's most dangerous characteristic – most dangerous for a writer – was his habit of telling people willingly and in detail the plan and subject of his unwritten books, and telling it extremely well. He would thus create a whole cycle of oral chapters and novels, worked out and completed to the last detail. The first hasty impression was that all that was needed was to write down those chapters – and the book would be ready. But in fact, it turned out quite differently: the spoken stories, transferred to papet, faded and died. Perhaps because Budantsev found it more interesting to tell them than to write them. It was impossible to transfer to paper the rich and brilliant intonations and the mimicry of which he was absolute master.

Ever since then I have understood the reason for the reserve of many authors on the subject of their future intentions, I realized that to blurt out the contents of things as yet unwritten can be dangerous.

Budantsev was one of the first to die in a Chukota concentration camp.

In 'Maleyevka' Alexander Bek[82] wrote his book about the famous blast furnace operator Kurako. Everyone was amazed by the method of work he had invented. After finding his main theme, the 'golden seam' as he called it, Bek would define the main character and the kind of people he needed for his book. These were always real people. Then he would good-naturedly, but mercilessly quiz these people about the circumstances of their lives and work down to the last detail. In this way Bek was able

to accumulate many notes and shorthand records of interviews. After deciphering them he would then get down to the real business. He would translate his shorthand records into literary prose and compose his book. He obtained total authenticity, and yet by selecting and cutting, separating and joining the available raw material to form different combinations and by imposing his own evaluation of the characters concerned and presenting them in the light of his own choosing he was able to create a genuine piece of literature rather than a mere documentary. It was by this method that he wrote the book about Kurako and his other books, including *The Volokolamsk Highway* which made him famous.

Bek was more persistent in his work than any other writer I have ever known. Sometimes his labours seemed to me quite beyond the capacities of one person. A quick-witted man who sometimes liked to act the simpleton, he was an exceptionally mild character, and entirely straightforward. He proposed setting up an immense library for which the Writers' Union would be responsible and which would contain shorthand readings of interviews with all the famous people of our country. In this way, he argued, we would create a splendid collection of basic data for the history of the USSR and at the same time provide writers with a vast wealth of raw material. Anyone could use the shorthand records for his work.

So far as I know, Bek even started drawing up a long list of our prominent contemporaries who should be interviewed. The list included scholars, engineers, inventors, workmen, artists, writers, agricultural specialists, breeders, singers, travellers, revolutionaries, architects, concrete workers, poets, horticulturists, ballerinas, doctors, civil engineers, sailors, generals, hunters – men of all professions and those who had had varied and, at times, unusual experiences.

Unfortunately, this grandiose scheme proved to be unrealizable. Wherever Bek appeared he immediately drew everyone around him into the orbit of his own enthusiasms, and infected them with his indomitable, yet gentle energy and his inexhaustible

curiosity. Life in his presence became more interesting than it had been before his appearance on the scene. Any close friends or acquaintances of Bek's found they could no longer do without him – without his bold plans, noisy arguments, jokes and practical ability.

I came fully to appreciate his energy and devotion to literature only much later when together with him, Emanuel Kazakevich, and some other writers, I took part in the publication of an anthology. The main editor was Kazakevich, a sparkling man, if one can use such an expression. Infinitely gifted, with a penetrating mind, the courage of a common soldier and a merciless wit, he was lyrically affectionate to his friends and kind to all really good people. He knew no pity for double-dealers, toadies and presumptuous fools from all ranks of society. Towards them his attitude was harsh and even cynical.

I visited Kazakevich a few days before his death. He was dying of cancer and was perfectly aware of it. Nothing could conceal from him the fact of his rapidly approaching end. Everything pointed to it – the terrible pains, the bright, lemon-yellow colour of his skin and even the fact that the door to his flat remained open so that visitors should not ring or knock. The least little knock caused Kazakevich sharp physical pain. There were many other signs which told him he was dying. He could read them above all in the eyes of his family and friends, in their forced, unnatural calm, in the invisible, held-back tears more difficult to bear than the most desperate sobbing. And yet he read out to me a venomous epigram he had just composed, directed against a critic, and when we were saying goodbye, he gripped my sun-tanned hand in his own, which was yellow and weak (with thin bones showing through the already dead skin), looked at both our hands and said with a little laugh:

'The amity of peoples! Of a European and a yellow man. Fit for a poster.'

I wanted to kiss his hand, but did not dare for fear of upsetting him. We merely embraced. But everything in me screamed out

for a miracle, for the absolute need of a miracle, for breathing life into him, be it through my own breath, in order to restore to existence a fascinating man, so needed by all, so needed by the nation.

A few days later, a coffin lid was standing up against the wall near the wide open door of his flat in Lavrushin Lane. Everything in this world could be accepted, everything but that coffin lid, but the solitude of the grave which had come to claim that stormy man.

That year autumn was making rapid strides, morning frosts began early in the season. The neighbouring forests turned yellow in a matter of two or three nights. I love autumn more than any other time of the year. Perhaps because so little time is allotted to it with its life of rustling branches and falling leaves.

In 'Maleyevka' I studied autumn closely and without undue haste, like a naturalist. The doctors vetoed all work for a period of two months, however I began writing all the same, and tried to deceive myself, pretending that I was not writing literature, but merely a dry account of the progress of autumn. There was no need for me to invent anything – all I had to to was to put down my observations.

An old, grumpy poet was living in 'Maleyevka' at the time. His face invariably wore a sour expression. He was sarcastic and unfair. All modern poets, according to him, wrote nothing but 'stinking little verses'. Only three of us remained in 'Maleyevka' till late autumn: the old poet, a voluminous, unwieldy economist (for some reason the poet called him 'a little birdlet') and myself.

The economist spoke to us exclusively on literary subjects; on the principle, it would seem, of 'when with writers, do as writers do'. We felt utterly exhausted by his persistent questions about writers and about sensational events in the literary world.

For some reason the economist was especially interested in Michael Svetlov.[83] He kept badgering us with one and the same question: 'What kind of life does Svetlov describe?' At first we

tried to tell him quite seriously about Svetlov's poetry. But this failed to satisfy him, and in the evening he asked us the same damned question: 'What kind of life does Svetlov describe?'

'Spanish,' I replied with some irritation. 'You've read his *Granada*, haven't you?'

'I may have, but Svetlov has made a muddle of it. Is there, for instance, such a thing as a Granada District in Spain?'

'Of course there is.'

'Really? How interesting! And what kind of life does Ehrenburg describe?'

'Diplomatic and Central European,' hissed the old poet, and his eyes and his glasses glittered diabolically.

But the economist would not keep silent.

'Is there such a genre?' he asked ingenuously. 'Did Ehrenburg work in the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, then? What was his rank, do you happen to know?'

We did not know. Then the economist, without wasting time, immediately asked us about Pasternak – what kind of life was he describing?

'Country cottage life,' I answered, at the end of my tether.

'Why?' asked the economist, suddenly worried. 'Has he got a country cottage near Moscow? Just think of it – a poet with a country cottage!'

We were sick and tired of the economist. We used to hide from him, but he caught up with us everywhere – in the wood, in the fields, in the gullies of the Vertushinka and – quite unbearable, this – in our rooms while we were working.

Occasionally I went out to fish in the neighbouring stream Ruza. The poet would follow me, but instead of fishing would sit next to me and read aloud his own and other people's poetry. Several times I hinted that fish were afraid of noise and kept away from such loud voiced poets.

'Doesn't matter!' he would reply. 'They must get used to that. *You* may not be interested in listening to my poetry, but for the fish it is capital entertainment. They have a devil of a life. The

water in the river is icy, the silt is filthy, they eat ghastly stuff – worms, maggots and bitter weeds; and in the water it's dark and cold and frightening. At any moment they might hear the clang of a pike's jaws – jaws of steel. And then they have to clear out as quickly as they can!'

These conversations bored me and disturbed my peace of mind but I had to put up with them: the poet knew many poems and epigrams by heart. He also composed them more or less impromptu.

Soon the economist went and a lovely life started for us in 'Maleyevka'. There were only the two of us left and we were amazed that the house was kept open.

The poet grew kinder, thoughtful even, and began to work. All his poison seemed to have been blown out of him by the cold autumn air. Every day he wrote a poem about the sunset. Sunsets in the country around Moscow were wonderful that autumn. They lit up the neighbouring woods as candles are lit – one after the other – with a gloomy yellow light.

At every sunset there were a few minutes when the colours started to fade, the blue of the sky seemed to fly upwards and reach its zenith, and a lilac darkness silently filled the fields and forests. Leaves fell incessantly, as though there were no end of them.

23
'Go on Living as You've Started'

In spite of the doctors' veto, I wrote a long short story in 'Maleyevka', called *Colchis*. I wrote it quickly and easily, without exerting myself and this quite frightened me. I had heard so many writers say (on the whole, rightly) that the more effort is demanded in writing a book, the more considered and well-knit is the final product. I had no one to whom I could show my new story. I was afraid of the old poet. However, I was fortunate because Rozanov,[84] a children's writer and author of a very charming book *The Adventures of a Blade of Grass*, came to spend a few days in 'Maleyevka'. I read him several chapters from *Colchis* and he praised it with so much affection and simplicity that I ceased worrying and even decided to send it in for inclusion in Gorky's anthology *Year 1916*.

Gorky read *Colchis* 'with his own fair hands' as he put it to me afterwards, and made only one comment. I had written that geraniums were typical of petit-bourgeois homes, the chief ornament of bourgeois windowsills. Gorky replied in the margins of the manuscript to the effect that no plants or flowers could be bourgeois or trite and that geraniums were the favourite flowers of the urban poor, of airless basements where poor artisans huddle in great numbers. It had long been a popular conviction that geraniums purified the stale and stuffy air of workshops – those of metal workers, of cobblers and others. Hence their popularity. I met Gorky soon after 'Maleyevka' and he reproached me for being insensitive to the beauty of these flowers.

'Perhaps one day you will find yourself in Italy,' he said. 'There you will see such splendid geraniums everywhere, that you won't be able to take your eyes off them. Here in Russia, I consider, the best geraniums are grown in Novgorod. All the little suburban districts of that wonderful city are aflame with scarlet geraniums. You've never been to Novgorod?'

'No, never.'

'You must go there. You must! The old girls in the suburbs will treat you to limeleaf tea. It has a marvellous taste, that tea, though frankly only for the connoisseur.' He drummed on the table and added: 'A local speciality! I love local specialities. They are the oil colours which are used to paint the picture of Russia on a canvas. Do you like the artist Kustodiev?'

'Very much.'

'All these things are part of the same order,' said Gorky, following with his eyes the twisting little column of smoke from his long, thin cigarette, 'Kustodiev, booths for Punch-and-Judy shows at fairs, green pastures, aromatic woodwork goods, shawls round the shoulders of Volga beauties, houses with mezzanine floors, geraniums on windowsills, pink sunsets – the kind that look so lovely reflected in a samovar – boys selling decorated gingerbread . . . A wonderful artist! Wonderful! Do you like poetry?' he asked unexpectedly.

'I do. But in my own way.'

'How do you mean, "in your own way"?'

'I cannot read more than two or three short poems in one day. But these two or three poems I remember for a long time, sometimes for ever.'

'An enviable quality!' said Gorky, again drumming on the table with his fingers, and looking away as he added: 'I can't do that any more. The effect of sclerosis, perhaps? And who, my dear sir, are you keen on at the moment? Of the modern poets?'

'Blok. And Pasternak.'

'You have a rich life!' remarked Gorky. 'Very commendable!

There's no end to the marvels the poets can tell us. But personally, I still like Pushkin best of all.'

He sang a line or two of Pushkin's poetry in his bass voice and grew thoughtful.

'You go to Novgorod. It's full of those friendly old Arinas.[85] Russian poetry more or less owes its origin to them.'

That autumn in 'Maleyevka' I had read many poets – Vasilyev,[86] Svetlov, Zabolotsky,[87] Pasternak. On an impulse, I quoted a few of my favourite lines out of each of these poets to Gorky. Rather unexpectedly, he was moved.

'How was it?' he said, 'How was it? Say it again.'

I quoted a verse from Vasilyev and another from Pasternak.

'A very exact description,' said Gorky about Pasternak's verses on rain. 'But who are you really – a prose writer or a poet? A poet, I should say.' He laid his large hand on my shoulder and pressed it slightly. 'Carry on! Go on living as you've started – and whatever happens never say die!'

Notes

1. *sarafan*: embroidered woman's dress.
2. *Gudok*: 'Train whistle'; the official organ of the railways' administration.
3. Victor Shklovsky (b.1893): eminent literary scholar and Formalist critic, author of a book on Laurence Sterne. A member of LEF. His influence in the 1920s was immense, and he continued to write articles, books, and scenarios throughout the Stalinist era, to the present day.
4. Ilf: pseudonym of Ilya Feinzilberg (1897–1931): co-author with Petrov of satirical novels *Twelve Chairs* (1928) and *The Golden Calf* (1931): author of *Notebooks* published posthumously in 1939.
5. Yury Olesha (1899–1960): novelist and playwright, best known for his novel *Envy* (1927).
6. Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940): outstanding playwright and novelist, born in Kiev; author of *The Master and Margarita* which was not published till 1967.
7. Semyon Hecht (1903–63): novelist known particularly for stories on Jewish life.
8. *Vopli i Sopli*: literally 'Wails and Snot'.
9. Isaac Babel (1894–1941): outstanding short story writer; died in a concentration camp.
10. Vasily Reginin (1883–1952): journalist and playwright.
11. Velemir Khlebnikov (1885–1922): Futurist poet noted for his linguistic experimentation. He died of malnutrition in 1922.
12. Efim Zozulya (1891–1941): writer of short stories, mainly satirical. Killed in the war.
13. Alexander Dovzhenko (1894–1956): leading Soviet film producer, who also wrote film scripts and stories.
14. Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz (b.1894): leading Polish poet and prose writer.
15. Konstantin Fedin (b.1892): leading 'Fellow Traveller', novelist. He has been secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers (in succession to Surkov) since 1959.
16. Emmanuil Kazakevich (1913–62): well-known novelist.

17. Victor Ardov (b.1900): writer of humorous stories, film scenarios and satirical sketches for the variety stage.
18. *Moryak*: 'Seaman'. For Paustovsky's experiences on the staff of the *Moryak* see his *Southern Adventure* (published by Harvill Press Ltd. 1969).
19. Pavel Nakhimov (1802–1855): Russian admiral commanding Russian naval forces in the Sebastopol Campaign.
20. Ivan Betskoy (1704–95): educationalist. Founder of schools for women.
21. Lev Slavin (b.1896): Jewish writer from Odessa; a friend of Babel.
22. *Ogonyok*: 'Little Flame'; a Soviet periodical.
23. Bagritsky: pseudonyn of Edward Dzyubin (1895–1934): poet, leading representative of the revolutionary romantic style of the early twenties.
24. Osip Kolychev (b.1904): poet and song writer.
25. Naum Grebnev (b. 1921): poet and translator.
26. *besprizorniki*: children who had lost thier parents, or been abandoned by them during the revolution and civil war, and were roaming the country in organized bands.
27. Alexander Blok (1880–1921): great Russian symbolist poet of his time; welcomed the revolution in his poem *The Twelve*.
28. Grin: pseudonym of Alexander Grinevsky (1880–1932): novelist.
29. ROSTA: Rossiyskoye Telegrafnoye Agentstvo: Russian Telegraph Agency.
30. *liman*: flat, wide estuary of certain rivers in Rumania and South Russia.
31. Mikhail Prishvin (1873–1954): prominent novelist and short story writer distinguished by his love of nature.
32. Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930): the leading figure in Russian Futurism. In addition to his vast output of poetry, he wrote two plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* and edited the journal *LEF* (1923–25). Under attack by RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), involved in difficult love affairs and probably disillusioned by post-revolutionary reality, he committed suicide.
33. Sergey Esenin (1895–1925): lyrical poet of the Imagist school. Married the dancer Isadora Duncan. Went abroad in 1923, returned 1925. Hanged himself.

34. Nikolay Aseyev (1889–1963): Futurist poet influenced by Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky; a member of LEF. He was awarded the Stalin prize in 1941. After Stalin's death, he helped some of the younger poets, but was very conformist in public utterances.
35. Andrey Platonov (1899–1951): outstanding novelist whose work was suppressed in the later Stalin years, but is now very popular among Soviet readers.
36. Anna Kern, who was staying at her cousin's estate, Trigorskoye. On the occasion of his visit to Trigorskoye, Pushkin wrote a poem to Anna Kern, where he called her a vision of 'pure beauty' able to bring back to him the emotions and the inspiration which had deserted him.
37. Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–89): revolutionary publicist.
38. Vsevolod Garshin (1855–88): short story writer who enjoyed a great vogue in the seventies and eighties of the last century.
39. Kassian of Krasivaya Mech: reference to a story by Ivan Turgenev.
40. Ilya Ehrenburg (1891–1967): famous Soviet novelist. His picaresque novel *Julio Jurenito* (1921) is a satire on all political régimes, including the young Soviet one. The hero, a wandering Mexican (said to be based on Diego de Rivera), comes to grief and dies there.
41. Arkady Gaidar (1904–41): famous writer of stories for children.
42. Alexander Roskin (1898–1941): literary and theatrical critic. Author of several books for children.
43. Michael Loskutov (1906–40): story writer and journalist.
44. Paul de Kruif (1890–1971): American writer.
45. George Chulkov (1879–1939): poet; translator of Maeterlinck.
46. Alexey Arbuzov (b.1908): well known playwright.
47. Nikolay Atarov (b.1907): short story writer.
48. Alexander Pismenny (b.1909): novelist and short story writer.
49. Boris Lavrenev (1891–1956): well known novelist and playwright.
50. Alexander Malyshkin (1892–1938): well known novelist.
51. Abram Derman (1880–1952): literary and theatrical critic; novelist.
52. Fyodor Tyutchev (1803–73): famous poet.
53. Vasily Grossman (b.1888): novelist. His anti-Stalinist novel *Forever Flowing* has been published only in the West (1973).

54. Evgeny Tarlé (1875–1955): noted historian.
55. Detgiz: publishing house for children's literature.
56. Michael Kutuzov (Field-Marshal) (1745–1813): Russian commander-in-chief during Napoleon's invasion.
57. Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942): religious painter who adapted to the Soviet régime.
58. Martiros Saryan (1880–1972): Armenian painter.
59. Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927): Russian painter and Academician.
60. *yurta*: a Kalmyk tent.
61. *baranka*: a ring-shaped roll.
62. *chagan*: similar to the reed mace (*typha*) found elsewhere in Europe, including the British Isles.
63. Konstantin Lipskerov (1889–1954): poet and playwright.
64. Taras Shevchenko (1814–61): Ukrainian poet.
65. Basmachi: anti-Soviet nationalist movement in Central Asia.
66. Stroganov: one of a dynasty of early Russian industrialists in the Urals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
67. Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak (1852–1912): novelist who wrote about Siberia and the Urals.
68. Boris Pasternak (1890–1960): poet and author of the novel *Doctor Zhivago*.
69. Shaft-bow: in Russian harness, a bow-shaped piece of wood attached by its ends to each of the shafts and forming an arc directly above the horse collar.
70. Sergey Tretyakov (1892–1939): playwright, best known for his drama *Roar, China!*
71. Gavriil Derzhavin (1743–1816): noted Russian poet.
72. Sapozhok: literally little shoe.
73. Mikhail Saltykov (1826–89): satirical writer. Wrote under the name of Shchedrin. In some of his novels the action takes place in Poshekhonye.
74. *sharwary*: trousers worn by Moslem populations in the Caucasus, the Middle East and elsewhere, with a baggy seat and tight round the legs.
75. *kizyak*: dung, dried, pressed, cut into bricks and used as fuel in the Caucasus and Central Asia.
76. Lydia Seifullina (1889–1954): novelist and short story writer well known in the 1920s for her realistic descriptions of Russian peasant life.

77. Vertushinka: a diminutive of *vertushka*; a whirligig.
78. Ivan Franko (1856–1916): leading Ukrainian writer.
79. Sergey Budantsev (1896–1937): novelist.
80. Vasily Shkvarkin (1893–1967): novelist and dramatist.
81. Emile Mindlin (b.1900): writer and critic.
82. Alexander Bek (b.1902): novelist.
83. Michael Svetlov (1903–64): popular poet famous for his lyrical ballads.
84. Sergey Rozanov (1894–1957): writer of stories and plays for children.
85. Arina Rodionovna: Pushkin's nurse, the subject of several of his poems.
86. Pavel Vasilyev (1910–37): poet who was executed in 1937. Posthumously rehabilitated.
87. Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903–58): poet, writer of children's stories and translator from the Georgian and German. Best known for his poetry, the first volume of which, *Pillars*, was published in 1929. Arrested in 1938 and condemned to five years in corrective labour camps in the Soviet Far East and Karaganda. Released in 1944, returned to Moscow in 1946 and was elected to the Union of Soviet Writers.
88. Ruvim Frayerman (b. 1891): born in Mogilev, Belorussia. Writer of stories, many about the Soviet Far East, in which he specialized and where he served with the Partisans during the Civil War. From the thirties onwards he wrote mainly for children.

'Ever since childhood,' says Paustovsky in *The Restless Years*, 'I felt annoyed that the earth had all been explored and described.' Fortunately this did not deter him from setting out to explore and describe it for himself. There are few modern Russian writers who have travelled so much about their country as Paustovsky or to such good effect. His curiosity about people and places was inexhaustible and his descriptions and character sketches are always vivid, always illuminating.

The Restless Years covers the early twenties, though the author darts backwards and forwards in time, sometimes to as late as the 1950s. As a newspaper correspondent and in search of material for books and stories, he finds himself in the little known, blisteringly hot desert around the Caspian, in the Arctic wastes of the Northern Urals, in Central European Russia, in the Caucasus, on the shores of the Barents Sea, the White Sea, the Black Sea. The effects of the Revolution were only just beginning to penetrate the interior of the country and life had not yet radically changed from what it had been in the Tsarist past. Paustovsky describes the transition period with great charm and skill. Frequently he is the only source for significant details concerning interesting and important personalities particularly in the Russian literary world. It will henceforth be impossible to write about Babel or Bagritsky or Ilf and a host of minor Soviet literary figures without first consulting Paustovsky's autobiography to see what he has to say about them.

Sadly this sixth volume of his *Story of a Life* is the final one, the last he wrote before his death in 1968.

The Author

Konstantin Paustovsky, born 1893, went to school in Kiev and afterwards to Moscow University, as described in his *Story of a Life: Childhood and Schooldays*. When the First World War broke out he was not accepted for military service but worked in various capacities: in a field dressing station, in an armament factory and eventually as a journalist in Moscow. The volume in which he tells of these experiences, *Slow Approch of Thunder*, ends with the outbreak of the Revolution. During the succeeding turmoil, mistaken by the Bolsheviks for an Anarchist, he narrowly escaped being shot; later he made his way to Kiev, a battle centre of the Red Army, the White Army and the Ukrainian Nationalists; he had many adventures, which are described in *In That Dawn*.

Years of Hope takes up the story from the time of his arrival in Odessa, recently evacuated by the Whites and still under blockade. Living conditions were appalling. In spite of this, intellectual life flourished, the city was full of poets and writers. These included Babel of whom Paustovsky gives an unforgettable picture.

The fifth volume, *Southern Adventure*, describes life in the Caucasus in the early twenties. The Soviet regime was still extending its sway over the disintegrating territories of the former Russian Empire and had only just established itself in the republic of Abkhazia. His is probably the only authentic first-hand account of that strange, southern world, little enough known at the time and which has since disappeared for ever.

In 1927 he gave up journalism to write novels, short stories and essays which gained him a unique position in the Soviet literary world. In 1964 he visited England. In July 1968 he died.

STORY OF A LIFE

Konstantin Paustovsky

I CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOLDAYS

Translated by Manya Harari and Michael Duncan

'Paustovsky gives us his childhood remembered not with nostalgia but with wonder and delight . . .' *Observer*

II SLOW APPROACH OF THUNDER

Translated by Manya Harari and Michael Duncan

'It is impossible to over-emphasize the calibre and integrity of Konstantin Paustovsky's writing.' *Sunday Telegraph*

III IN THAT DAWN

Translated by Manya Harari and Michael Duncan

'His theme is revolution and Russia, or rather revolutionaries and Russians. Everything is stripped to the bone until nothing is left except what is vivid and necessary.' *The Times*

IV YEARS OF HOPE

Translated by Manya Harari and Andrew Thomson

'. . . retains his gentle sense of irony and self-mockery as well as his fastidious, beautifully economical gift for capturing a scene, a conversation, an episode in a few diamond-hard words. Helped by an excellent translation, he is as spare and lucid as his idol Isaac Babel . . .' *Sunday Times*

V SOUTHERN ADVENTURE

Translated by Kyril FitzLyon

'Poetic yet precise, sensuous, yet restrained. Always objective. No one has better described that period of transition.'

The Times